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# Muckrakers vs. Public Relations: Analytical Case Studies

Maria NeCastro

*University of Maine - Main*

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# MUCKRAKERS VS. PUBLIC RELATIONS: ANALYTICAL CASE STUDIES

by

Maria T. NeCastro

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Journalism)

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## Advisory Committee:

Michael Socolow, Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism,  
Advisor

Sarah Harlan-Haughey, CLAS-Honors Preceptor of English

Jim Bishop, Lecturer, English (Retired)

Hollie Smith, Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Communication and  
Journalism

Beth Staples, News Writer, Division of Marketing and Communications

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the three independent case studies in this thesis is to examine the complex relationship between investigative journalism and corporate public relations. By examining the journalistic works written by three of America's best-selling authors and the following corporate communications responses, it becomes possible to understand the importance of strategic communication. Ultimately the dynamic relationship between investigative reporting and public relations is one that produces visible change, within both society and corporations.

## DEDICATION

In memory of Susan Willey—a beloved teacher, mentor and friend.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to my advisor, Michael Socolow, for all of the time he has spent mentoring me on this project, as well as Jen Bonnet, for her research guidance. I would also like to thank my committee members, Sarah Harlan-Haughey, Jim Bishop, Hollie Smith and Beth Staples, for their support and advice. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for always encouraging me to pursue my goals.

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## INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, there has been a battle between investigative journalism and public relations over who is to inform the public. While both fields borrow techniques and stylistic methods from each other, their dynamic relationship often hinders the public's access to accurate and essential information. Journalists have played a key role in the public's knowledge of current events, global disasters and scandals of all kinds, while inspiring governmental, environmental and social change through their work. All the while, the organizations these journalists have exposed needed to find ways to maintain strong public images.

This dialectic relationship between the two communication fields is not a new concept. Stuart Ewen's *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (1996) details some of the most important battles. Two of the most influential faces in the histories of journalism and public relations are Ida Tarbell and Edward Bernays. Tarbell, as one of the most well-known journalists of the early 1900s, wrote an exposé about the Standard Oil Company (*The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904)) that led to the dissolution of the oil monopoly in 1911. Less than a decade later, Bernays, known today as "the father of public relations," began a series of legendary public relations campaigns, ranging from branding Lucky Strike cigarettes as "Torches of Freedom," to convincing the United States public that bacon and eggs are the "true American breakfast." These two communication innovators are the inspiration for this study.

The central purpose of this thesis is to provide an analytical and descriptive study of the dialectic relationship between informative reporting and public relations. This



study will use specific case studies to explore the common themes, issues and strategies used by journalists and public relations executives across time.

As Bernays said, “It is sometimes possible to change the attitudes of millions but impossible to change the attitude of one man” (Tye, 2002, p. 102). This “one man,” or, in the discussed case studies, one person, often tends to be someone seeking truth. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, to muckrake means, “to search out and publicly expose real or apparent misconduct of a prominent individual or business” (“Muckracke,” 2007).

There is a model of muckraking that was pioneered by Ida Tarbell’s work in the first decade of the twentieth century. It involves in-depth investigative journalism first in a magazine series then collectively in book format. Tarbell’s articles in McClure’s magazine prepared audiences for her substantial book *The History of the Standard Oil Company*. Rachel Carson, Barbara Ehrenreich and Eric Schlosser each made waves in the same manner that Tarbell did when she brought the wrongdoings of the Standard Oil Company to light and was faced with a corporate public relations rebuttal.

The discussed pieces of journalism in this thesis each had exposure prior to the publishing date of their book forms. *Silent Spring* appeared in *The New Yorker* as a three-part series in the summer of 1962, the first chapter of *Nickel and Dimed* appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in January 1999 and *Fast Food Nation* began as a two-part article in the fall of 1998.

While each of the books is focused on different issues, they share essential journalistic elements with each other. Carson’s *Silent Spring* brought attention to the issue of pesticide use, just as Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* shed light on the problems

that low-wage Americans face trying to make ends meet and finally in the same way that Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* exposes the tactics of the fast food industry. The works all provided historical information, statistics and suggestions from their authors, in addition to the thorough reports that provoked change in the pesticide industry, Wal-Mart and McDonald's, respectively.

The investigative journalists mentioned in the three individual case studies, Carson, Ehrenreich and Schlosser, have a great deal in common with each other. Perhaps what the journalists share above all are their impressive levels of education. In chronological order: Carson completed a bachelor's degree in science and received masters degrees in marine biology and zoology; Ehrenreich earned a bachelor's degree in physics and a doctorate in cell biology; and Schlosser studied American history in his undergraduate career and British history in his graduate work.

Despite the fact that none of these highly educated individuals had studied specifically to become journalists, they all proved to be very talented at writing for mass public audiences, as exhibited in their varying forms of muckraking. The three managed to translate complex social problems in a way that enables the general public to understand while maintaining a writing style that was engaging to its audience, as proven by book sales and public debate. It is likely that what made Carson, Ehrenreich and Schlosser successful in their journalistic pursuits is that each had fairly extensive writing backgrounds. Carson had written freelance in the 1930s for *The Baltimore Sun*, Ehrenreich began to write books on social issues in the early 1970s and Schlosser began his journalism career in the early 1990s.

The fact that the three discussed authors had the ability to obtain a high level of education and pursue a relatively low-paying career in investigative journalism proves another commonality among them: some level of privilege, whether it was self-earned or inherited. Carson had a full-time environmental job, Ehrenreich was a scientist and Schlosser's father was the head of NBC.

It also seems that the public relations responses to the discussed texts have commonalities. Each of the responses that will be discussed managed to demonstrate both a rhetorical response and attempts to address the criticism in an operational or systematic way within the organization or industry being attacked. Specifically, chemical companies released defensive literature in 1962 and discontinued the use of DDT in products sold in the United States in 1972; Wal-Mart focused on persuasive advertising in 2001 and became more philanthropic to unexpected charitable causes (including National Public Radio) in 2004; and McDonald's released statements denying Schlosser's claims and changed their menu offerings in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

While there is a multitude of similarities between the three case studies, it will also be important to look closely at the apparent differences in terms of the journalists and actions of corporate public relations teams. By examining the three works and the reactions provoked by each, it appears that the works of Carson and Schlosser elicited similar amounts of criticism. The two authors experienced harsh words from the corporations that they wrote about, yet managed to inspire more proactive change than their muckraking counterpart, Ehrenreich. A possible explanation of this phenomena is that the previewed portions Carson and Schlosser's work that appeared before their works were published as books made mention of specific corporations, while Ehrenreich's did

not state anything regarding the Wal-Mart corporation. While other journalists had the opportunity to expand upon the issues within the chemical and fast food corporations, there was no forewarning of an attack on Wal-Mart based on the *Harper's* piece.

Another difference that is important to look at when discussing these three cases is that Carson was the only one who had a visible team of her own preparing for corporate backlash. It is possible that the social progress made within the forty-nine years between the publishing of the works made it possible for Ehrenreich and Schlosser to have less fear about the consequence of their words.

Furthermore, it is likely that corporate culture plays a role in what is considered an appropriate reaction to muckraking. In the early 1960s, corporate public relations was a fairly new concept, thus companies had no real frame of reference in regards to suitable attempts to manage a corporate image. Although Carson's work, *Silent Spring*, was released nearly five decades before *Fast Food Nation*, McDonald's managed to provide a negative reaction to criticism as well. What is interesting is that Wal-Mart, the youngest of the three entities, had a different approach to handling their threatened image, as it focused on the positive and began to restructure its communications staff. It is worth mentioning, however, that this mild reaction may be a result of the fact that Ehrenreich's words seemed to be the least harsh toward the varying corporations.

It is also important to note that both Carson and Schlosser received the chance to publicly discuss the content of their work with the corporations of which they were critical on CBS and BBC, respectively. This fact illustrates the sort of relationship between journalists and corporate public relations that was not apparently present in the reception of Ehrenreich's work. As she explained in an interview for *Columbia*

*Journalism Review* regarding the manner in which *Nickel and Dimed* was received, “My moment of maximum influence was in the summer of 2001 when it first came out and I was invited to Washington to speak to a lunch of Democratic senators...I said to myself, ‘Wow, I am so influential!’ But then came 9/11 and they forgot all that” (Sherman, 2001).

Another important aspect of the three case studies is that two of them are related to the works of women. It seems as though misogyny and gender roles played a strong part in the reception of Carson’s work, but were not present in the reception of Ehrenreich’s. While Carson received comments calling her a “spinster” and “uninformed woman,” Ehrenreich actively mentioned that her work assignment at Wal-Mart seemed sexist, but did not receive flack for being a female speaking about the struggles of low-wage America.

By taking a closer look at the dynamic relationship between investigative journalism and corporate public relations, it is possible to interpret the effects of corporate responses to individual journalistic works, as well as the social changes with which the works have been correlated.

This thesis will hopefully benefit future investigative reporters by showing how public relations strategies borrow from the techniques of journalism in order to undermine independent, investigative reporting.

## Methodology

The primary methodology of this work will be a descriptive case study method, in which the author will examine three cases to compare specific details in the context of the

dynamic relationship between investigative journalism and corporate public relations.

The relationship that will be discussed is one of action and reaction. In the case studies presented in this thesis, the initial action is the wrongdoing of a corporation, the reaction is the investigative report by a journalist and the final action is the corporate public relations' response to the report, otherwise known as damage control.

The thesis will consist of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. In each chapter the individual works will serve as the case study, each contextualized by reference to contemporaneous journalism and contemporaneous public relations. Within the case studies will be an overview of the piece of investigative journalism, as well as brief reviews and summaries of other relevant pieces of work, including previous scholarship, articles or documentaries. This analysis will also contain details such as histories of the varying corporations being investigated and any lawsuits in which they were involved before journalists revealed their work. These case summaries will also cover biographical information about the journalist.

Reviews within the chapters will be followed by an analysis of dynamic relationship between public relations and the publication under examination. Analyses will consist of corporate public relations responses to the studied works and any policies that were changed as a result of the works.

### Important terms

Throughout this thesis, the following defined terms will be used repeatedly. In order to assure clarity while reading, please refer to the following definitions. According

to Harry H. Stein and John M. Harrison, authors of *Muckraking: Past, Present and Future* (1973), **muckraking** is defined as being

Associated with four major press traditions in America. It bears closest resemblance to investigative journalism; less to advocacy journalism. It has distant relation to sensationalistic and yellow journalism...Muckrakers exercise a surveillance over a wider area than government and politics and so have probed the unique and the common in American society, the highest reaches of power and the everyday social patterns of the population.

**Journalism** is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as, “the activity or job of collecting, writing, and editing news stories for newspapers, magazines, television, or radio” (“Journalism,” 2006). **Investigative reporting**, thusly, can be defined as a form of journalistic writing in which a reporter thoroughly investigates a specific topic, generally of importance and/or public interest.

**Public relations** was once described by Edward Bernays as being as “the engineering of consent.” The Public Relations Society of America now defines the concept with the following definition: “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (“What is Public Relations,” 2013).

A **corporate response**, as it will be discussed in the context of this thesis, includes any actions taken or messages produced during crises that have damaged a corporation’s image or reputation (Benoit, 1997).

## CHAPTER 1

This chapter will discuss the muckraking efforts of Rachel Carson and her 1962 work, *Silent Spring*, as well as the numerous responses she received from the corporate public relations specialists at several chemical companies. *Silent Spring*, a work about the dangers of pesticide use elicited a negative response from chemical corporations, but also managed to create visible change in the form of anti-DDT legislation.

“It is clear that we are all to receive heavy doses of tranquilizing information, designed to lull the public into the sleep from which *Silent Spring* so rudely awakened it,” said Carson to the Women’s National Press Club in December 1962 about the suppressive information that chemical industries were distributing after the release of her controversial 1962 work (Murphy, 2005).

This work and the environmental and social changes that ensued have led to Carson being compared to the muckrakers of the early 1900s (Bausum, 2007). These powerful investigative writers include Lincoln Steffens, who exposed political corruption in U.S. cities in his 1904 work *The Shame of the Cities*; and Ida Tarbell, who revealed the monopoly of the Standard Oil Company. Carson’s work, much like that of the investigative journalists before her, has helped to shed light on important issues and created changes that are still valued today.

Just as Tarbell’s work is credited with helping to break up a monopoly in 1911, Carson’s *Silent Spring* has been recognized for its role in the chemical pesticide DDT being banned. This work led to U.S. President John F. Kennedy’s strengthening of pesticide regulations, the banning of DDT in the United States in 1972 and the



international banning of DDT in 2004 (“Congressional Record,” 2010). Like most great movements, this change came with a great deal of struggle.

### Rachel Carson

Rachel Louise Carson was born on May 27, 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania. Carson, known today as a scientist, ecologist and writer, grew up on a farm. From a young age she was interested in nature and the living world. "She enjoyed wandering around in the fields," said Patricia DeMarco, the executive director of the Rachel Carson Homestead. "It was her playground. She just was very fascinated with living things and growing things. From an early age she wanted to be a writer and her mother was teaching her at home a lot" (Johnson, 2007). She initially entered Pennsylvania College for Women as an English major with a focus on writing, but decided to pursue her scientific interests. In 1929 she graduated from the school, now known as Chatham College, with a bachelor's degree in biology. She went on to graduate school at Johns Hopkins University, where she earned an MA in zoology in 1932. During this period, she taught at both Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland and spent summers working at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory on Cape Cod (“Rachel Louise Carson,” 2014).

Before writing the books that have since permanently tied her name to the environmental movement, the conservationist and marine biologist took a position at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries in 1936, which later became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) (“About the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,” 2007). At this job, Carson was able

to combine her talents and interests in both natural science and writing, and became the editor-in-chief of the FWS.

When she worked for the government, Carson also dedicated time to her own writing and publishing efforts. Carson wrote for local newspapers in Baltimore, MD and Richmond, VA, including the *Baltimore Sun*, for which she created feature articles on natural history (Murphy, 2005). She also wrote several articles to teach people about the beauty of the living world, including *Help Your Child to Wonder* in 1956 (Cason, 1956).

Prior to writing what is now her most celebrated piece of scientific nonfiction, *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote several other books. *Under the Sea-Wind*, which began as an article in a 1937 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, was published in 1941. Her 1951 work, *The Sea Around Us*, was a National Book Award winner and national best-seller in the U.S. *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson's third book, was published in 1955.

Carson's official research for *Silent Spring* began in 1958 when she received a letter from a friend concerned about a large number of birds that had been killed near Cape Cod, Massachusetts, which was believed to be a result of DDT usage. Since its commercial introduction in 1945, few had criticized DDT's possible effects on the environment and wildlife, but Carson had investigated the chemical for many years before she had the opportunity to fully explore the ramifications of its use. In 1945 ("Rachel Carson to The Readers Digest") she wrote to *Reader's Digest* proposing an article in which she would explain a series of tests involving DDT that were being conducted near her home in Maryland, but the magazine rejected the idea ("The Story of Silent Spring," 2000).

Between 1945 and the time Carson began her research that would lead to the

production of *Silent Spring* the use of the pesticide had multiplied. Once *The New Yorker* and Houghton Mifflin finally gave her support in 1958, the author took four years to complete her work, in which she described how DDT entered ecosystems and subsequently entered the bodies of animals, including humans, accumulating in the fatty tissues and causing cancer and creating genetic damage.

Upon publication day, September 27, 1962, the advance sales of the book amounted to 40,000, and another 150,000 copies were distributed to the Book of the Month Club. Within the first year of publishing, more than 250,000 copies of the book had been sold (McLaughlin, 1999). In 1963, 11 years after having been awarded the National Book Award for her nonfiction bestseller, *The Sea Around Us*, Carson was nominated for the same award for writing the revolutionary *Silent Spring* (“National Book Awards 1963,” 2002).

This was the last book that she published before she died in 1964 of cancer. Carson’s work in her last book, according to Linda Lear, author of *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, “compels each generation to reevaluate its relationship to the natural world” (Carson, 2012, p. xviii-xix). Although the author died before she was able to see major results from her work on this of environmental pollutant, she left behind some of the most influential environmental writing that has been published thus far.

### *Silent Spring*

When Carson agreed to write *Silent Spring* for Houghton Mifflin and *The New Yorker* in 1958, she thought that the work would be ready for publication in the summer of 1959. Carson and her publishers realized early in the writing process that the amount

of research needed to make a convincing argument would require far more research than was originally anticipated. With delays from this issue and health-related problems, the manuscript was completed in January 1962 (Murphy, 2005). Houghton Mifflin released Carson's final book, *Silent Spring*, in September 1962 after *The New Yorker* had published its primary text as a three-part series beginning in June 1962. The nonfiction work that became one of the most influential books in the environmental movement created the social background required for a nationally important discussion about the use and long-term effects of pesticides, particularly dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT).

This topic, however, was not entirely new. In 1961 a *Times* editorial called for greater controls of and more education regarding pesticide hazards, and the *Saturday Evening Post* published, "Pesticides Are Good Friends, But Can Be Dangerous Enemies if Used by Zealots." This particular editorial described the study conducted by Michigan professor George Wallace regarding the decreasing robin population on campus and his argument that "the current widespread and ever-expanding pesticide program poses the greatest threat that animal life in North America has ever faced" (1961).

DDT had been approved for use in 1945. While numerous other authors and publications had covered various aspects, Carson's work proved to be unique in the sense that her writing provided the context for readers to become both intrigued and educated by the subject. As an experienced and award-winning author, Carson managed to get people from a variety of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds thinking about the future. The Book of the Month Club immediately picked up her work for their October mailing (Lear, 1997).

The 17-chapter book opens with, "A Fable for Tomorrow" which is cautionary

10-paragraph story about “a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings,” which was suddenly stricken by a “blight” which brought silence to the springtime because there were no birds. She writes,

In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves (p. 3).

The book’s second chapter is devoted to explaining her philosophical reasons for completing the work and clearly states that she does not agree with the idea of completely banning pesticides. She concludes the chapter by quoting Jean Rostand, writing, “The obligation to endure gives us the right to know” (Carson, 2002, p. 13).

From the start of the third to the end of the seventh chapter, Carson discuss the ways in which chemical pesticides, intended to control insects, plant diseases and weeds, pose a threat to all living things. A quote from the third chapter titled “Elixirs of Death,” that likely sparked controversy in the pesticide industry reads:

Every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals...In the less than two decades of their use, the synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur everywhere. They have been recovered from most of the major river systems and even from streams of groundwater...Residues of these chemicals linger in soil to which they may have been applied a dozen years before. They have entered and lodged in the bodies of fish, birds, reptiles, and domestic and wild animals so universally that scientists carrying on animal experiments find it almost impossible to locate subjects free from such contamination...these chemicals are now stored in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings, regardless of age (2002, p. 15-16).

These sections explain the problems created by using harmful chemicals in varying ecosystems and environments. Chapters eight through 10 present a particular aspect of

the issue, give specific examples of the problem at hand, a call for action and a search for a solution.

Chapter 11, “Beyond the Dreams of Borgias,” which addresses the dangers of crop dusting and spraying to kill gypsy moths and Japanese beetles, proved to be one of the most confrontational chapters. In this section Carson challenges the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regarding the topic of consumer foodstuffs being contaminated. The chapter is full of incriminating facts about the organization’s practices, which she later validates with her expansive principal source list. Her writing has a rational and persuasive tone in regards to her professional feelings toward the FDA.

In setting a tolerance level the Food and Drug Administration reviews tests of the poison on laboratory animals and then establishes a maximum level of contamination that is much less than required to produce symptoms in the test animal. This system, which is supposed to ensure safety, ignores a number of important facts...Even if 7 parts per million of DDT on the lettuce in [one’s] luncheon salad were ‘safe,’ the meal includes other foods, each with allowable residues, and the pesticides on his food are, as we have seen, only a part, and possibly a small part, of his total exposure. This piling up of chemicals from many different sources creates a total exposure that cannot be measured (2002, p. 181).

From chapter 12 to 14, Carson describes the physical effects, including cancer, that can be caused by the ingestion of pesticides. She writes in her twelfth chapter, cautioning readers of the harms of pesticide use,

Where do pesticides fit into the picture of environmental disease? We have seen that they now contaminate soil, water, and food, that they have the power to make our streams fishless and our gardens and woodlands silent and birdless. Can [man] escape a pollution that is now so thoroughly distributed throughout our world? We know that even single exposures to these chemicals, if the amount is large enough, can precipitate acute poisoning...For the population as a whole, we must be more concerned with the delayed effects of absorbing small amounts of the pesticides that invisibly contaminate our world (2002, p. 188).

Chapter 15, “Nature Fights Back,” illustrates the ways in which nature perseveres when threatened, from mutations to increased resistance to hazardous substances. In

chapter 16 she informs readers that species of pests which have built up a resistance to pesticides may eventually prove to be unstoppable, which could lead to the spread of diseases.

The work concludes with, “The Other Road,” in which Carson offered ideas for nonchemical alternatives to pest control. These suggestions were not delivered in a harsh manner, but rather one that illustrated an educated idea of a way to success. Although the work includes several suggestions and does not support the complete discontinuing of pest control, Carson’s critics often ignore these efforts.

As a whole, Carson’s *Silent Spring* is a considered call to action that was widely read, despite criticism from chemical companies and critics that protested its contents. As she wrote, “The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts” (2002, p. 13).

The book is written with a scientific tone that manages to accommodate different levels of understanding in regard to biological functions, chemicals and diseases. At times, she may use technical terms but she quickly explains the relevancy of such an item. For example, in Chapter 5, “Realms of the Soil” she writes,

The origin of these insecticides has a certain ironic significance. Although some of the chemicals themselves—organic esters of phosphoric acid—had been known for many years...The organic phosphorus insecticides act on the living organism in a peculiar way. They have the ability to destroy enzymes—enzymes that perform necessary functions in the body. Their target is the nervous system, whether the victim is an insect or a warm-blooded animal. Under normal conditions, an impulse passes from nerve to nerve with the aid of a "chemical transmitter" called acetylcholine, a substance that performs an essential function and then disappears. ...This transient nature of the transmitting chemical is necessary to the normal functioning of the body. If the acetylcholine is not destroyed... impulses continue to flash across the bridge from nerve to nerve, as the chemical exerts its effects in an ever more intensified manner. The movements of the whole body become uncoordinated: tremors, muscular spasms, convulsions, and death quickly result (p. 28).

Furthermore, while her words toward enemies of the environment may be confrontational, she provides substantial evidence to support an informed and convincing argument. Her advice to find alternatives to pesticides rather than to completely discontinue their use is evidence that her work was an attempt to be practical rather than hurtful.

Some scholars have found Carson's writing content and style to contain a principled, moral argument. As Craig Waddell wrote in *And No Birds Sing*,

Carson insists that the pesticide issue has a moral dimension: "Incidents like the eastern Illinois spraying raise a question that is not only scientific but moral. The question is whether any civilization can wage a relentless war on life without...losing the right to be called civilized." As Carson represents this conflict, the unbridgeable ideological chasm is between domination and accommodation, arrogance and humility, stupidity and intelligence, greed and grace, right and wrong. Finding themselves publicly vilified, it is no wonder that chemical manufacturers attempted to block publication of the book and spent a quarter of a million dollars on a public-relations campaign. The ideological warfare of environmentalism continues today in much the same terms that Carson used, with a few new unbridgeable chasms appearing on the horizon, such as the ones separating patriarchy and ecofeminism, and anthropocentrism and biocentrism (2000, p. 165).

Thus, Carson employed a combination of scientific rhetoric, a popular writing style and moral outrage to effectively promote her argument.

### Corporate Response

Before explaining how various corporations affected by Carson's work responded to the assertions of *Silent Spring*, it is important to understand the social and economic climate in which such an industry thrived. In the mid-20th century, the pesticide and chemical production industry was booming, especially with the amount of knowledge



that had been gained from their development during World War II. Chemicals had cut disease-related deaths down to 115,000 between 1941 and 1945, from 373,458 between 1860 and 1865 (during the Civil War) and pesticide use was highly regarded.

After Swiss scientist Paul Müller discovered that DDT could kill insects, DDT was used during wartime to kill fleas and mosquitoes that carried potentially fatal diseases. Once scientists studied this chemical, they developed new insecticides and herbicides. These creations were intended primarily for agricultural purposes. In the late 1940s, chemical companies had invested \$3.8 billion in improving their production facilities and by 1952 registered nearly 10,000 pesticide products with the USDA (“The Chemical Age Dawns in Agriculture,” 2004).

When Carson’s book debuted, the pesticide industry was in its golden age and thus anyone who threatened the chemical companies’ success was typically the subject of a legal suit. Furthermore, the work was published at a time when public relations was expanding as an institutional profession and an essential piece of the corporate landscape. Chemical companies were at their most profitable stage, yet it was clear that many of them were attempting to generate campaigns promoting their products, even before *Silent Spring* (Markowitz and Rosner, 2002, p.139-167). In 1955, Gene Harlan and Alan Scott wrote, “Public relations is skilled communication of ideas to various publics with the object of producing desired results” (1955). A few years later John Marston wrote, “Public relations is planned, persuasive communications designed to influence significant publics” (1963). As early as 1963, one of the largest public relations firms in the United States, Hill & Knowlton, emphasized the importance of community relations (Morris, 2011, p.38).

With the growing importance of public relations in the corporate workforce accompanied by the advancements in the chemical industry, Carson's publishers would need to strategize when faced with the attacks that would come from the corporations they were affecting. The corporations most directly impacted by *Silent Spring* were DuPont, Monsanto, American Cyanamid, Vesicol, Goodrich-Gulf, Shell Chemical, Dow and W.R. Grace.

The first sign of objection from the chemical companies was when *The New Yorker's* legal counsel received a phone call from Louis McLean, who identified himself as an attorney for two chemical companies. When speaking with the legal council, McLean mentioned several details that his clients thought were inaccurate and urged the magazine to get an opinion other than Carson's to publish. When this call was received, *The New Yorker* had just printed the second part of Carson's three-part series, and McLean said, "in the interest of fairness, it would be better not to run the third part of the article" (1962). *The New Yorker* proceeded with publishing the third installment, and Carson's work continued to be negatively received by America's chemical industry leaders.

The next documented corporate response to *Silent Spring* was a formal letter McLean wrote in August 1962 to Houghton Mifflin's board chairman, William Spaulding. The five-page letter explained that McLean was officially working as secretary and general counsel for Vesicol Corporation. McLean cited the articles published by *The New Yorker* and accused the book of "disparaging products manufactured by a single company and of containing misstatements and inaccuracies." McLean conveyed that Vesicol's products ought to be treated fairly and truthfully. He

went on to say that if the publisher were to proceed with the same information that was presented within the magazine articles, there could be “unfortunate consequences” (McLean, 1962).

Houghton Mifflin’s editor in chief, Paul Brooks, was subsequently informed in 1962 that the National Agricultural Chemicals Association (NACA) was developing a \$250,000 public-relations campaign against *Silent Spring*, a total that was expected to exceed the publisher’s advertisement and promotional budget for the book (Brooks, 1972, p. 294). This campaign created two of the most detrimental counter-argumentative documents that Carson’s work faced. The first was Monsanto’s October 1962 parody titled, “The Desolate Year,” which was created for the company’s corporate magazine. Monsanto’s public relations department published and distributed 5,000 copies for editors and reviewers to correlate with the book’s release date. “The Desolate Year” suggested that devastation, famine and disease would be the imminent fate of a world in which chemical pesticides were banned. The parody resembled Carson’s short-story format found in *Silent Spring*’s first chapter. As a Monsanto official said of the controversy caused by *Silent Spring*, “This was, for us, an opportunity to wield our public relations power” (Graham, 1970, p. 65).

The next corporate move was made by the NACA in the August 1962 publication and circulation of a booklet entitled *Fact And Fancy: A Reference Checklist for Evaluating Information about Pesticides*. The booklet contained uncredited direct quotes from *Silent Spring* that were immediately refuted by quotes from people the NACA considered to be experts. The readings of the text from *Silent Spring* were referred to as “allegations.” The “facts” were provided by sources including Frederick J. Stare, one of

*Silent Spring*'s critics, and George C. Decker, a scientific adviser on insect control to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a consultant to chemical companies and one of the more forthright opponents *Silent Spring*. The reports in *Fact and Fancy* as well as the individuals who were cited in the pamphlet had close chemical industry associations, and many of the "facts" were biased (Murphy, 2005).

One such "fact" was this: "Despite the use of billions of pounds of pesticides on millions of acres of cropland, damage to wildlife has been relatively insignificant and in the vast majority of cases undetectable" (National Agricultural Chemicals Association, 1962, p. 3). Upon reading the pamphlet's contents, it is clear that Carson's extensive research is not taken into consideration. The pamphlet's last "fact" is as follows:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Public Health Service, the National Safety Council's Farm Division, the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, and individual companies which make pesticide chemicals are continually warning users of the nature of pesticide chemicals and cautioning them to read the label for specific warnings and cautions (p. 13).

Another such publication was written by McLean for Vesicol, titled *The Necessity, Value, and Safety of Pesticides*, which was 18 pages of philosophical and legal content related to pesticide usage. A section of McLean's work read:

Throughout the centuries, however, the superstitious and the impractical, giving voice to their desires to escape from reality, have repeatedly misasserted a benevolence in nature and have stated that man's efforts to bend nature to better serve man are themselves evil (McLean, 1962).

While it is clear that research had been done about pesticides, there was no evidence of any effort to look at the long-term effects of pesticide use as Carson did, especially in this passage from the McLean piece:

Insects annually kill and curtail more than 15.6 billion board feet of saw lumber in our forests and 2.8 billion cubic feet of other timber. This and the smaller losses of cover caused by fire each account for substantially greater losses of wildlife

habitats than the small amount of incidental damage caused by pesticides (McLean, 1962).

Carson's critics, both corporate and independent, said the author's eloquent writing in her previous works would "disparage her science, or express fear that literary brilliance will blind readers to what these critics consider logical or scientific flaws" (Gartner, 1983, p. 102).

Critics of *Silent Spring* exhibited an "Image Restoration Strategy" known as "reducing offensiveness of event". William Beniot explained this concept in his *Public Relations Review* article, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," as "those accused of wrong-doing may decide to attack their accusers" (1997, p. 179-181).

### Protecting *Silent Spring*

As early as November 1958, Carson and those most closely involved in the publication of *Silent Spring* recognized that the work would be challenged by chemical companies attempting to protect their interests. Carson wrote to a friend and FWS colleague in 1959 saying, "I feel that premature disclosure of even part of this material would do more harm than good to our cause...the whole thing is so explosive, and the pressures on the other side so powerful and enormous, that I feel it far wiser to keep my own council insofar as I can until I am ready to launch my attack as a whole" (Murphy, 2005, p. 42-43).

Carson's instincts were correct; over the course of the next few years she was called a communist and subjected to sexism. Her work was the subject of lawsuits threatened by chemical companies and parodies minimizing her extensively researched work (Lear, 1997, p. 206).

When Houghton Mifflin received requests for advance copies of the book by corporations and reviewers, the publisher's head of publicity, Anne Ford, took precaution to prevent legal actions. Ford wrote in a letter to Carson's agent, Marie Rodell, "Would you be sure that any proofs that are sent out are clearly marked 'uncorrected proofs,' and that the lawyer also told us we should write on them 'no quotation please.' This is to doubly insure us the proofs couldn't be borrowed by anyone and get into any hands that might possibly quote from them not realizing they are 'uncorrected proofs'" (Murphy, 2005, p. 71).

Carson's agent, Rodell, also showed some concern about DuPont asking for proofs in July 1962. She wrote, "The only danger in such a course is the remote possibility that a bad court might grant an injunction on inadequate evidence...if we were to delay sending books until they are in the stores in early September...we would then be robbed of one line of defense which would go as follows: 'You've had the books since early August. If you were going to object, that was the time'" (Murphy, 2005, p. 72).

With the NACA's publication of *Fact and Fancy*, which lifted uncredited quotes from Carson's work, Houghton Mifflin created its own booklet that was originally identical to the NACA format, but with filled with content that was correctly documented. Once Carson and others expressed that the work should not mirror the NACA format, "*The Story of Silent Spring*" became a publication that documented the career of the book, the work's publicity and the attacks on it from critics and corporations. Approval was given for 100,000 copies to be distributed, but the publication was delayed after pending Carson's meticulous review of it as her health was beginning to fail. Eventually only a few copies were sent out to television-page editors

prior to the next event that defined the dialectic relationship between Carson and corporate public relations (Murphy, 2005, p. 79).

### Conclusion

What is distinctive about the relationship between the writer and the corporations is that Carson and those who were most involved in the publishing of the work were fearful of the potential backlash that would be caused by *Silent Spring*'s content and popularity. With each move made by corporations prior to the publishing date, Carson's team tried to extinguish the threats of lawsuits and tarnishment of the work and the author's reputations.

The relationship that has been illustrated involves a text with the potential to change the minds of a nation and an industry that feared a change in public opinion. While corporate critics of *Silent Spring* failed to find character flaws in Carson or errors in her work, "the publications distributed by these groups resorted to unsubstantiated claims of scientific inaccuracy or bias, condemnations of emotionality in her work, and attention on the positive impact of their own products" (Chang, 2007).

During the time span of *Silent Spring*'s publishing several corporations proved to be dignified in the face of insult, as *The New Yorker* did not lose its advertisements from DuPont, Cyanamid and Esso/Humble during the period that the magazine published Carson's work (Murphy, 2005, p. 65).

While some corporations did not have a public comment, others were harsh with their critiques, as they were generally unable to find errors within Carson's text. One such commentary came from as Dr. Robert White-Stevens, a former biochemist and

assistant director of the Agricultural Research Division of American Cyanamid, who, as a spokesperson for American Cyanamid, told the public, “If man were to follow the teachings of Miss Carson, we would return to the Dark Ages, and the insects and diseases and vermin would once again inherit the earth” (Murphy, 2005, p. 152). Another critic of her work, former Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson questioned why, “a spinster with no children is worried about genetics” (Lear, 1997, p. 429).

Although most modern scholars have interpreted these comments, parodies and attacks to be unwarranted, the original format of Carson’s work may have justified some of the uproar from the chemical companies. As *Silent Spring* was originally published in *The New Yorker*, the work was mostly unaccompanied by her sources. McLean’s initial letter to Houghton Mifflin claimed that much of the information published in the series of articles was incorrect. Although *The New Yorker* had years of prestige, Carson’s articles had no real authority without a full presentation of her research. When the articles became the full book, however, Carson’s work became fully credible. With 55 pages of reference materials that provided legitimacy to her claims, the work was far fairer to the corporations it criticized than in its original format (Murphy, 2005, p. 29).

While the writer was invited to debate her work with her critics, her cancer did not permit her to travel to the various events where *Silent Spring* was being discussed. The relationship between writer and her corporate critics was evident, however, as it culminated in the Columbia Broadcast System’s broadcast of “C.B.S. Reports: The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson,” which was filmed in November 1962, aired on April 3, 1963. During the broadcast Carson said,

It is the public that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present



road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts... We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature... But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. The rains have become an instrument to bring down from the atmosphere the deadly products of atomic explosions. Water, which is probably our most important natural resource, is now used and re-used with incredible recklessness... Now, I truly believe, that we in this generation, must come to terms with nature, and I think we're challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves (Leonard, 1964).

Robert White-Stevens, the spokesman for the agricultural chemical industry that appeared during the broadcast, made statements including, "The major claims of Miss Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, are gross distortions of the actual facts, completely unsupported by scientific, experimental evidence, and general practical experience in the field" ("Silent Spring on television, 2012). After one of the broadcast's commercials, reporter Eric Sevareid presented the perspectives of industry spokesman White-Stevens, USDA Secretary Orville Freeman, a citrus grower, representatives from the PSAC, Public Health Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Although Carson's interview, book readings and voiceovers were juxtaposed by the chemical industry's position on her work, the broadcast still managed to speak about its similarities to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the fact Carson might be worthy of a Nobel prize (Murphy, 2005, p. 152-153).

When *Silent Spring* was published, Carson was accused by many of attempting to reverse the scientific progress that had recently been made by chemical companies. Although she and her work were repeatedly attacked, Carson's evidence proved to be relevant enough for executive legislation to spend time investigating the potential hazards of pesticide use. Whereas her work was provocative enough to gain the attention of

President Kennedy and his council, it was not so controversial that it drew all attention away from Carson's important research.

While Carson was unable to see the eventual effects of her work, *Silent Spring* is credited with having led to U.S. President John F. Kennedy's strengthening of pesticide regulations, the banning of DDT in the United States in 1972 and the international banning of DDT in 2004 ("Congressional Record," 2010). Alternatively, the public relations campaigns of the chemical companies are seen as one-sided and lacking forethought, which demonstrates that the relationship between public relations and journalism is not always balanced.

## CHAPTER 2

When Barbara Ehrenreich set out to write *Nickel and Dimed* at the turn of the 20th century, her intentions were to capture the struggles of low-wage Americans by going undercover. In the years since her work was published, her book has been recognized for exposing the truth about Wal-Mart. In response to *Nickel and Dimed*, Wal-Mart attempted to make light of her criticisms, but Ehrenreich's work continues to be credited with shedding light on the issues Wal-Mart has neglected.

In her March 2011 article for *The American Prospect*, "Wal-Mart – It's Alive!" modern muckraker Barbara Ehrenreich wrote,

What is Wal-Mart – in a strictly taxonomic sense, that is? Based on size alone, it would be easy to confuse it with a nation...But there is also the possibility that Wal-Mart and other planet-spanning enterprises are not mere aggregations of people at all. They may be independent life forms...This seems to be the conclusion of the 2010 Citizens United decision, in which the US supreme court, in a frenzy of anthropomorphism, ruled that corporations are actually persons and therefore entitled to freedom of speech and the right to make unlimited campaign contributions...Much has changed since my tenure at Wal-Mart. The company has struggled to upgrade its sweatshop image. It has vowed to promote more women. But one thing it hasn't done is to reconfigure itself as an anarchist collective. Bentonville still rules absolutely, over both store managers and "associates", which is the winsome Wal-Mart term for its chronically underpaid workers (Ehrenreich, 2011).

Since her employment at the Bentonville, Arkansas-based corporation while working as an undercover journalist, Ehrenreich, the author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, has given a voice to the struggle to make ends meet when living on the poverty line. Ehrenreich's work has been credited with sparking several documentaries, studies, articles and books that expose the work environment at Wal-Mart (Adams, 2011, p. 117-125).

## Barbara Ehrenreich

Ehrenreich was born in Butte, Montana, in 1941. Her family moved frequently throughout her childhood and adolescence. According to a profile on the writer featured in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “She went to high school in Lowell, Massachusetts, and in Los Angeles, where she was a self-described “geek, nerd, dork,” a reader of Dostoevsky and Conrad, two of her favorite writers” (Sherman, 2003). In 1963 she graduated from Reed College with a degree in physics and wrote her senior thesis about “Electrochemical oscillations of the silicon anode.” She continued her education at Rockefeller University and earned a doctorate in cell biology, graduating in 1968. Despite her extensive scientific background, she found herself more interested in activism (“About Barbara,” 2005).

In 1969 she joined the Health Policy Advisory Center, a nonprofit organization, which advocated for higher quality healthcare for low-income citizens. While working for the organization, she enjoyed writing investigative pieces for its monthly newsletter. By 1971, she had co-written a book titled *The American Health Empire: Power, Profits, and Politics*. During the 1970s, she began focusing on women’s healthcare, and by 1997 she had written 15 works on topics ranging from historical medical careers to social battles of the middle class.

In 1998 the author began working on her best-known book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. According to the previously mentioned article on Ehrenreich in the *Columbia Journalism Review*,

In 1998, over a lunch of salmon and field greens with Harper’s editor, Lewis Lapham, Ehrenreich, ruminating on welfare reform, wondered how four million former welfare recipients would survive on \$6 or \$7 an hour. “Someone,” she averred, “ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism — you know, go out

there and try it for themselves.” Lapham, with a half-smile, replied in an instant: “You” (Sherman, 2003).

According to *Harper's* profile of Ehrenreich, the work “originated as a piece of undercover reportage published in the January 1999 issue of the magazine, for which she received the Sidney Hillman Award in 2000” (“Barbara Ehrenreich,” 2013). Since being published, Ehrenreich’s investigative work has sold more than 1.5 million copies worldwide and is taught in many high schools (Drier, 2012, p. 414) and more than 600 colleges and universities today (“Barbara Ehrenreich: Dorsett Fellow - Winter 2008,” 2008).

To write the bestseller, Ehrenreich altered her social class to become one of the millions of low-wage workers in America. She did this by temporarily leaving her home and status as a writer “in exchange for an identity as a minimally skilled homemaker reentering the workforce. Her goal was to illuminate the lives of the working poor, especially the four million women forced into the labor market by welfare reform” (Donovan, 2002, p. 129-130). During this project, she lived in Florida, Maine, and Minnesota, each for one month. Throughout those months, she worked as a waitress, maid and sales clerk in an attempt to make enough money to completely pay for her lodging, food and living expenses.

After *Nickel and Dimed* was published in January 2001, Ehrenreich’s work was adapted for the stage in 2002 by Joan Holden under the advisement of the author. The play, which features eleven actors, has been performed throughout the country (Stevens, 2006). Since 2001, Ehrenreich has worked as columnist and contributor at the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Harper's* and *The Nation*; written for *Mother Jones*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ms*, *The New Republic*, *Z Magazine*, *In These Times* and other publications; and

published four books focusing mainly on the American social climate (“About Barbara,” 2005). The author received the Nation Institute/Puffin Foundation Prize for Creative Citizenship in 2004, which is given annually to an American “who challenges the status quo ‘through distinctive, courageous, imaginative, socially responsible work of significance’” (“Barbara Ehrenreich: Dorsett Fellow - Winter 2008,” 2008). She now lives in Florida and is an honorary co-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America and serves on the NORML Board of Directors.

### *Nickel and Dimed*

Ehrenreich’s 2001 work, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, is a compilation of her experiences working in low-wage, entry-level jobs while trying to maintain housing and other basic needs. The book analyzes both Ehrenreich’s personal struggles and the struggles of the people she meets who work in these low-wage jobs. Over the course of three months, documented in three individual chapters, the author takes five jobs, ranging from waitress to maid to Wal-Mart sales associate. After working for one month in Florida, she travels to Maine and Minnesota, spending roughly a month in both locations.

Ehrenreich documents the start of her quest to understand the struggles of low-wage workers in her first chapter, “Serving in Florida.” She begins working at a restaurant that she calls Jerry’s in Key West, FL. Throughout her month spent on the job, the author realizes that the job is more difficult and physically demanding than she had expected. She explains the problems that she has in working with other employees, as well as the rough relationship she has with her manager.

During her time at the restaurant, she also finds it difficult to find affordable housing and speaks about her co-worker living in a vehicle to make ends meet temporarily. To pay for the trailer she has found to live in, the under-cover writer takes a second job as a housekeeper at the hotel to which Jerry's is adjoined. After working as a housekeeper for one day, however, she quits the job and soon after quits waitressing at the restaurant, having only worked for two weeks total in Key West. She reflects that she feared she would not have been able to make rent on her housing if she had continued in either of her jobs.

Ehrenreich chronicles her experience working in Portland, Maine, in the second chapter, "Scrubbing in Maine." She explains that she decided to move to Portland, Maine, as the primarily Caucasian population she had seen in the area while traveling there to speak at a college in the past had intrigued her. At this location she is able to find two jobs that she is able to work at simultaneously, as well as several weekly hotels for living arrangements.

Her weekend job is as a dietary aid at a nursing home, where she feeds residents and cleans up food items, primarily in the ward for Alzheimer's patients. At the same time she begins working weekdays as a maid for a housekeeping service. She finds that the latter job is more physically and mentally strenuous than she had originally anticipated, as its requirements and schedule are quite rigorous. After spending a month bonding with her co-workers, she reveals her undercover status and leaves Maine.

The primary focus of this chapter of this thesis is centered on Ehrenreich's third chapter, "Selling in Minnesota," in which she takes a job as a sales associate at Wal-Mart in Minneapolis. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, it is estimated that the

author was making \$5.15 per hour at the corporation (“Changes in Basic Minimum Wages in Non-Farm Employment Under State Law: Selected Years 1968 to 2013,” 2013). A large portion of this chapter is dedicated to the record-low vacancy rate of the city and the author’s struggle to pay for any housing with the little money she was making. Originally she had applied to work at both a hardware store called Menards and Wal-Mart. Unlike her previous jobs, she was required to take a drug test in order to be considered for hiring at both of the establishments. After hearing back from both businesses that she was requested to attend new employee orientation, Ehrenreich decided to take the position at Wal-Mart, although she would be paid less than if she had chosen to work at Menards. She writes of this decision,

I just tell [the manager of Menards] I’m going to send my knife, my vest, and my tape measure back. In the days that follow I will try to rationalize this decision by telling myself that, given Wal-Mart’s position as the nation’s largest private employer, whatever I experience there will be of grand social significance (2001, p. 149).

She describes her orientation at Wal-Mart and explains that the company discourages any union involvement. She finds that organizing the ladies’ clothing department is repetitive and that it is difficult to stand on her feet for an entire day, as she had in other recent employments. She wrote about the physical difficulties that came with the job, “The embarrassing truth is that I am just too exhausted to work, especially for eleven hours in a row” (2001, p. 149). By the end of her month in Minneapolis, she has discovered her lack of freedoms as a Wal-Mart employee, such as not being able to have discussions with other employees and random work rescheduling without advanced notification. Throughout her time at the store, she is able to bond with a couple of her co-workers and explain to them that they deserve better wages for their work and that they



could benefit from the intervention of union rules.

In this section that would be seen as controversial to Wal-Mart in regard to the corporation's stance of staying clear of unions, Ehrenreich recounts,

Then I get a little reckless. When an associate meeting is announced over the loudspeaker that afternoon, I decide to go... we're meeting in lawn and garden today, and chat with whoever shows up, today a gal from the optical department...forced to take the job because of a recent divorce, she tells me, and sorry now that she's found out how crummy the health insurance is. There follows a long story about preexisting conditions and deductibles and her COBRA running out. I listen vacantly because, like most of the other people in my orientation group, I hadn't opted for the health insurance—the employee contribution seemed too high. “You know what we need here?” I finally respond. “We need a union.” There it is, the word is out. Maybe if I hadn't been feeling so footsore I wouldn't have said it, and I probably wouldn't have said it either if we were allowed to say “hell” and “damn” now and then or, better yet, “shit.” But no one has outright banned the word union and right now it's the most potent couple of syllables at hand. “We need something,” she responds (2001, p. 181-182).

She continues by explaining the conversations that she has with other workers about the conditions in which they work,

After that, there's nothing to stop me. I'm on a mission now: Raise the questions! Plant the seeds! Breaks finally have a purpose beyond getting off my feet. There are hundreds of workers here...I reject the break room for this purpose because the TV inhibits conversation, and for all I know that's what it's supposed to do...Almost everyone is eager to talk, and I soon become a walking repository of complaints. No one gets paid overtime at Wal-Mart, I'm told, though there's often pressure to work it. Many feel the health insurance isn't worth paying for. There's a lot of frustration over schedules, especially in the case of the evangelical lady who can never get Sunday morning off, no matter how much she pleads. And always there are the gripes about managers: the one who is known for sending new hires home in tears, the one who takes a ruler and knocks everything off what he regards as a messy shelf, so you have to pick it up off the floor and start over. Sometimes, I discover, my favorite subject, which is the abysmal rate of pay, seems to be a painful one (2001, p. 182-183).

The book closes with a section titled “Evaluation,” in which the author describes how she believes she performed in each job. She writes that the jobs she held, which required little previous knowledge, were socially, mentally and physically challenging.

She concludes that these jobs maintain such low wages because of their various reinforcements of low self-esteem, high demand for employment and lack of education available to low-income Americans.

Ehrenreich is no more critical of Wal-Mart than she was of her other mentioned employers in *Nickel and Dimed*, but the fact that Wal-Mart is the most well-known of the establishments means that they had the most to lose as a consequence of her journalism.

Scott Sherman explains in his profile on the author in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that,

Ehrenreich is hardly the first journalist to delve into the world of the poor. *Nickel and Dimed* fits neatly into a literary tradition that includes Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). London and Orwell, who provided stunning descriptions of England's slum dwellers and coal miners, respectively, endeavored to shatter the complacency of middle-class readers — to show them, in Orwell's words, “a world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about.” Like Orwell, Ehrenreich wanted to shock her readers, and shame them, and show them “a world apart”...*Nickel and Dimed* is not the work of a novice, but of a seasoned writer (2003).

### Corporate Response

Reports as early as 1994 display that the Wal-Mart corporate officials take the company's image and reputation management very seriously. Former Wal-Mart spokesman, Don Shinkle wrote in a 1994 article for *Public Relations Quarterly*,

How do you measure the benefits of public relations? Even in a perfect world, you don't. The best professionals among us earn their keep by knowing what the public wants, persuading the other top executives to respond to the public, and then educating the public about what the company does for them...What is easy to monitor is the number of times the media cover a story on your company or its products...For the past eighteen months, Wal-Mart has been able to track, measure and analyze—on a monthly basis—all of our electronic and print clips. This has allowed our company to compare our sales and adjust our public relations efforts by ADI. We know precisely where to focus special attention next month, based on last month's report.

Shinkle continues by clarifying the advanced purposes of their database,

We also know, through this database, which reporters are more balanced and which ones need special stroking based on previous reporting. The service identifies each piece as a news story, letter to the editor, editorial, or opinion piece. It also includes the media outlet and reporter's name, so we can see exactly how our company is being portrayed in each ADI...We know if our negative press is coming from a ruling on a legal case or on a new market entry. We know if it comes from a mistake in something we said. As a result, we can work more closely with the appropriate Wal-Mart departments to ensure that both the court of law and the court of public opinion—our customers, associates and shareholders—get the whole story. Essentially, we have a map to tell exactly where to put our budget dollars each and every month.

The article concludes with the spokesman's explanation of how the company views public relations from a budgetary standpoint,

Wal-Mart is known for being extremely frugal with its dollars...Now, we have a cost-saving tool that we are using successfully in our public relations budgeting...It's a valuable tool, one that could strengthen the overall public relations industry, especially at budget time (Shinkle, 1994).

While Wal-Mart did not make a direct statement regarding Ehrenreich's 2001 work, it is clear that the corporation and its public relations specialists did not agree with the statements that *Nickel and Dimed* made about its standards. Before and even after the work was published, Wal-Mart stood beside their decision to keep employee wages low. As company creator Sam Walton said, "I pay low wages. I can take advantage of that. We're going to be successful, but the basis is a very low-wage, low-benefit model of employment" ("Is Wal-Mart Good For America: Inside the World's Largest Company," 2004).

Although most of Wal-Mart's television commercials focus on the benefits of shopping at their store, two of the company's commercials that aired in 2001 following Ehrenreich's book were specifically about the happiness that working at Wal-Mart

brings. A commercial that aired (about two months after *Nickel and Dimed*'s release date) on Fox during a February 25, 2001 showing of *Malcolm in the Middle* featured five Wal-Mart sales associates. Each of them had something positive to say about their employer. Phillip, one of the employees says looking into the camera, "I always had heard that Wal-Mart was a great company to work for." Another employee, Lori, says, "We laugh at Wal-Mart—we have fun," which is followed by a camera panning over a line of workers in their royal blue Wal-Mart-branded vests who cheer "Wal-Mart." The commercial concludes with lines including, "It's like a family. It's like big happy family," "I love coming to work every day (laughs). How many people can say that?" and "Wal-Mart is a great place to work for anybody" ("Walmart is a great place to work," 2001).

Shortly after the first advertisement aired, another appeared on television that featured the bond between employee and customer. Carolyn, a sales associate says, "I love my work—I really have the best job in the world. Everyone that I have ever met likes everyday low prices. You can go into Wal-Mart and know that there's a huge team effort to ensure you're getting these low prices. Everyone likes to save money—it makes you feel good." The majority of the employees that appeared in both advertisements were approximately Ehrenreich's age when she wrote *Nickel and Dimed* (50s), and all but one were female ("Walmart commercial 2001," 2001).

In the years prior to the release of *Nickel and Dimed* in 2001, Wal-Mart released few commercials regarding the feelings of their employees about the corporation. In the 2002 Wal-Mart corporate report an article titled "The Company We Keep: Associates Keep Wal-Mart Thriving in a Difficult Year for Retail." One of the company's public

relations specialists wrote,

Our Associates keep Wal-Mart thriving during the difficult times. For this Company's success to continue, we must constantly develop future leaders who understand our goals, especially in relation to our customers. To do that, we nurture these leaders from their earliest days with the Company. More than 60 percent of our store managers were "grown" through the Wal-Mart organization, starting as store Associates who served customers as part of their daily responsibilities. As the Company moves forward, it is even more important that we help develop from within the talent needed to run these stores, clubs and distribution centers (2002, p. 4).

The article continues:

Cutting across all of these job roles and store formats are the core values that apply to our Associates worldwide: "Respect for the Individual," "Service to Customers," and "Strive for Excellence." We truly believe that our Associates make the difference, and that our greatest responsibility as a Company is to ensure the continued development of this invaluable asset. If we succeed in this, we can be confident that we are doing our best for our stakeholders: customers, Associates and investors. This is the Company we keep (2002, p. 5).

In March 2002, *Fortune* magazine released a piece that included a statement made by Wal-Mart Vice President of Corporate Affairs, Jay Allen,

If we didn't practice respect for the individual, didn't operate in an open-door environment, we would not be living up to the expectations that our associates have of us...Managing payroll—managing expenses in general—has always been a huge priority...To get everyday low prices you have to have everyday low costs. There's always been a huge intensity for managing expenses (Gimein, 2002).

Some bystanders to this situation may view Wal-Mart as having done relatively little to combat Ehrenreich's critical words about their company, but upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the company did respond in a specific manner of public relations crisis management. This form of crisis management, described in William L. Benoit's 1997 article in *Public Relations Review*, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," is known as "Reducing Offensiveness of Event: Bolstering." When a company bolsters its image in an effort to reduce offensiveness, it stresses its

positive traits rather than attempting to refute negative claims. Benoit wrote of this strategy,

First, a corporation may use bolstering to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward itself, in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act. Businesses may describe positive characteristics they have or positive acts they have done in the past. After the Valdez oil spill, for example, Exxon's Chairman Rawl declared that "Exxon has moved swiftly and competently to minimize the effect this oil will have on the environment, fish, and other wild- life." He expressed his sympathy to "the residents of Valdez and the people of the State of Alaska." These sentiments, if accepted, should bolster its image and offset damage to its reputation (1997, p. 179-180).

Ehrenreich's work is credited with having sparked other critical views of Wal-Mart. Thomas Jessen Adams wrote in his essay, "Wal-Mart and the Making of 'Postindustrial Society'":

Beginning with Barbara Ehrenreich's bestselling 2001 muckraking study of the modern working poor, *Nickel and Dimed*, and followed by a host of television specials, documentary films, academic conferences, and popular business and sociological studies, the Bentonville, Arkansas, firm has resoundingly entered American discourse. Academic and popular interest have firmly ensconced the corporation and its relationship to politics, economics, labor, culture, and community cohesion as a major cultural problem in the modern United States (2001, p. 117).

As time progressed and more people began to understand the opportunity for discourse about the Wal-Mart corporation, provided in part by Ehrenreich's call for action, an increasing number of analyses, criticisms and critiques about the brand emerged. Unions throughout the United States began rioting in several locations in 2002 to urge employees to join, as Ehrenreich had suggested in "Selling in Minnesota" (Cleeland and Goldman, 2002). Wal-Mart has claimed it is not anti-union, but rather that it is "pro-associate." The company argues that its open-door policy between employees and managers prevents the need for employees to pay dues to a union, as it claims that complaints and suggestions are considered even at the top of the corporate ladder

(“Walmart's Position on Unions (For U.S. Operations Only),” 2006).

The company always has and still continues to disagree with Ehrenreich’s suggestion of unionizing. As early as 1970, the company’s founder, Sam Walton, hired a professional union buster in an attempt to resist unionization being suggested in Missouri by Retail Clerks International Union (Olsson, 2003). In 1997 the store’s corporate staff created and distributed a pamphlet to store managers, more than 50 pages in length, titled “A Manager’s Toolbox to Remaining Union Free.” A section of the pamphlet marked “The Open Door” says, “Open communication is the key to stopping a union organizing attempt before it ever gets started” (“Wal-Mart: A Manager’s Toolbox to Remaining Union Free,” 1997).

In response to the 2002 labor union protest, the company made a statement saying,

We have denied the allegations made by the unions many times... We have clear policies to follow the nation's labor laws and to pay our associates properly for every minute that they work. If we ever fall short in these or other areas, we take corrective action... We're not a union company. But we're a big help to working families throughout the nation [by charging low prices]... Whatever the union says about us, that won't change (Schooley, 2002).

Analyses of the Wal-Mart corporation and its relationship with employees continued in 2003, when *USA Today* and *Bloomberg Businessweek Magazine* asked whether the company was “too powerful.” The *USA Today* article published in February said that more than forty lawsuits had been filed by employees forced to work overtime with no pay. The article also discussed the labor rallies held in the prior year, sexual discrimination and low-wages (Armour, 2003). The October *Businessweek* article weighs the cost and benefits of the corporation’s presence in America, stating that, “Wal-Mart might well be both America's most admired and most hated company” (“Is Wal-Mart Too

Powerful?,” 2003).

More discussions and debate about Wal-Mart surged in 2004 with the PBS Frontline feature, “Is Wal-Mart Good For America,” and in November 2005 with the release of a documentary titled *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*. The PBS special and its companion literature featured sections titled “The Secrets of Wal-Mart’s Success,” “Transforming America” and “The China Connection” (“Is Wal-Mart Good for America?,” 2004).

According to an article in a 2004 volume PRSA’s *The Strategist*, Wal-Mart made substantial donations to foundations and causes it had never supported before, including National Public Radio, which is associated with PBS. Of these charitable contributions *Strategist* writer Alison Stateman says,

The retailer's recent efforts to do good by be-coming a sponsor of National Public Radio and providing \$500,000 in scholarships to minority students at journalism programs around the country, have been met with skepticism. Media accounts of the retailer's plans point out that Wal-Mart has not supported any of these organizations in the past and that the financial contributions seemed an attempt to portray the much-maligned company in a positive light to audiences that have opposed its expansion (2004, p. 9).

The following 2005 documentary, directed by Robert Greenwald, focuses on Wal-Mart’s poor value of worker rights, low-wages, destruction of mom-and-pop shops and lack of environmental concern (Burr, 2005). In response to *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, Wal-Mart’s corporate communications team released a press kit in October 2005 titled “Robert Greenwald to Release Another Misleading Video: Most Recent Effort Attacks Wal-Mart With Blatant Disregard For the Facts.” The kit included a press release, negative reviews of the film, a list of Wal-Mart’s contributions to working families and a section with evidence to prove Greenwald’s statements wrong, titled



“Robert Greenwald: Three Errors in Three Minutes” (“Robert Greenwald to Release Another Misleading Video,” 2005). The corporation hired former presidential advisers to assist in maintaining the brand’s image after it was, “under fire from well-organized opponents who have hammered the retailer with criticisms of its wages, health insurance and treatment of workers,” according to a November 1, 2005 *New York Times* article. The article cited Wal-Mart’s overseer of corporate communications, Robert McAdam, as saying that Wal-Mart “has to run a campaign...It’s simply nonsense for us to let some of these attacks go without a response” (Barbado, 2005).

In response to further criticism, investigative articles and debate about the corporation in 2005, Wal-Mart executive H. Lee Scott, said, “I’d suggest a better headline, ‘Wal-Mart is great for America’,” when discussing headlines on editorial pages such as “Wal-Mart’s low prices come at too high a cost” (Greenhouse, 2005). Scott continued in a subsequent discussion by saying, “If they don’t want Wal-Mart in their community, then just say it. Don’t hide behind all this malarkey...The critics are the ones who simply want to maintain the status quo because change isn’t necessarily fun. Innovation and competition changes the status quo” (Bhatnagar, 2005).

To continue promoting a positive public image, the company hired Richard Eldeman, the president and chief executive officer of the public relations company, Edelman. According to a 2006 *Wall Street Journal* article,

In its pitch for the account, Edelman had warned Wal-Mart that Google results for a “Wal-Mart” search yielded mostly unflattering material, potentially overshadowing the company’s own sites. Edelman sought to balance that equation by funneling positive information about Wal-Mart to bloggers. Later in the summer, Edelman booked [Wal-Mart CEO Scott] in several unfamiliar forums, such as Mr. [Al Sharpton]’s radio show, where the CEO fielded questions from listeners. In July, Mr. [Leslie Dach] arranged for former Vice President [Al Gore] to speak about environmental issues and screen his global-warming movie “An

Inconvenient Truth” at a quarterly meeting of Wal-Mart employees and environmental groups. Mr. Gore's camp initially had concerns about Wal-Mart's sincerity on the issue, but Mr. Dach helped allay them. “Leslie brings some credibility and integrity,” said Roy Neel, Mr. Gore's chief of staff (Hudson, 2006).

One of the only documented Wal-Mart responses to *Nickel and Dimed* is discussed in *Wal-Mart: The Bully of Bentonville*. The work, originally published in 2006 states that, although the author did not score perfectly on her initial test to become a Wal-Mart employee, “Ehrenreich was hired anyway, an error the company had cause to regret when her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, an exposé of working poverty, became a bestseller in 2001.”

*The Bully of Bentonville* continues explaining that rather than responding to Ehrenreich's documented discussion with another store employee, Marlene, about high turnover rates, they emphasize the application rate. Of speaking with Marlene, Ehrenreich writes,

In her view, Wal-Mart would rather just keep hiring new people than treating the ones it has decently. You can see for yourself there's a dozen new people coming in for orientation every day—which is true. Wal-Mart's appetite for human flesh is insatiable; we've even been urged to recruit any Kmart employees we may happen to know (2001, p. 184).

The text from *Bully of Bentonville* explains,

[Wal-Mart CEO] Scott rarely mentions Wal-Mart's turnover rate when he steps forward to argue that the company is a great place to work. Instead the CEO focuses attention on the application rate. “We had 500 job openings, we had 5,000 applications,” said Scott of a new store opening in Phoenix. “Maybe it's different where you live, but where we live, people don't line up to get a job that pays less and has less benefits. The world does not work that way” (Bianco, 2009).

Furthermore, in the 2006 book, *Wal-Mart World: The World's Biggest Corporation in the Global Economy*, authors Jennifer Bair and Sam Bernstein write, “Wal-Mart has come under attack of late from a wide variety of constituencies for the

treatment of those who labor for the company.” After citing Ehrenreich’s work as one of these attacks, the writers explain,

These attacks have generated negative publicity, but the impact on the company’s performance is ambiguous. Even as Wal-Mart continues to grow, its stock has remained more or less flat for several years. It is clear, however, that the recent deluge of criticism has put the company on the defensive. This is reflected in its decision to hire a new public relations firm, to emphasize its financial support of various community organizations, to invite academics studying the company to search findings at a conference, and to inaugurate a Web site designed to counter what it contends is a lot of misinformation disseminated by ill-informed or self-interested critics (Brunn, 2006, p. 100).

Despite the fact that the company continues to claim to provide benefits and opportunities to all of its employees, former Wal-Mart worker, Julie Heimeshoff, brought her case to the United States Supreme Court, after she had been denied benefits after 20 years of service. Wal-Mart and its long-term disability insurance provider won the 2011 suit, however, claiming that the statute of limitations had expired (“Heimeshoff v. Hartford Life & Accident Insurance Co.,” 2013).

Today, Wal-Mart continues to publically reinforce its support and appreciation of its employees. In a thirty-one-video playlist titled “Associate Stories,” on Wal-Mart Corporate’s YouTube channel, in which associates, managers and other employees share their positive stories about working at Wal-Mart. One of the videos posted in October 2013 features several employees making statements including, “I have a 401k-retirement plan,” “I started part-time, now I’m a manager,” “I get bonuses, even working part-time,” “Where I work, over 400 people are promoted every day,” “Healthcare starting under \$40 a month,” “I got education benefits” and “There’s more to Wal-Mart than you think...Opportunity, that’s the real Wal-Mart” (“Walmart Corporate,” 2013).

## Conclusion

Barbara Ehrenreich's 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* provided a platform for America's concerns about Wal-Mart to be heard. While the corporation did not make a direct statement regarding Ehrenreich's work, it bolstered its image in response to the book's release and responded with comments to the subsequent discussions of the corporation. Even though the company came under fire for several accusations regarding negative treatment of employees, the company's net sales, net income and return on assets continued to increase each year.

It is important to realize that Wal-Mart did not directly attack Ehrenreich or her work when it was published in 2001. There is a possibility that the corporation did not take the work seriously enough to make a direct statement, as she was not a trained journalist, nor had her work had exposure in the media, but it is also possible that timing played a part in the reception of her work. The author offers some insight in regards to why her work did not receive the attention it deserved in interview with Sherman for *Columbia Journalism Review*,

Some reviewers have likened *Nickel and Dimed* to Harrington's *The Other America*, but Ehrenreich herself resists the comparison. *The Other America*, published in 1962, was rapturously received in the Kennedy White House, and the book eventually did much to inspire the War on Poverty of the 1960s. "There was nothing magical like that" happening with *Nickel and Dimed*, she explains, owing to a very different political climate in Washington. "My moment of maximum influence was in the summer of 2001 when it first came out and I was invited to Washington to speak to a lunch of Democratic senators." She also met with some progressive members of Congress. "I had all these Democratic senators and congresspeople listening to me, and nodding, 'yes, yes, we must do something!' I said to myself, 'Wow, I am so influential!' But then came 9/11 and they forgot all that" (Sherman, 2003).

In addition to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Wal-Mart was facing what has become known as the "the largest civil rights class-action case against a private

employer in US history,” in which six female employees filed a discrimination suit, according to the *Mother Jones* article, “TIMELINE: How Walmart Conquered the World” (Lee, 2012). It is possible that, had the book been released at another time, its content could have been more influential. It is clear, however, that the work quickly gained the attention of legislators and scholars. By 2003, Columbia University sociologist Herbert Gans said that *Nickel and Dimed* was “probably the best-selling book about poverty of the last quarter century,” as the work had sold over 800,000 copies in its first two years of existence in print.

Exposure may have also played a role in Wal-Mart’s reaction to Ehrenreich’s book, as the company has a history of responding to its well-known and more observable critics, even prior to the 2000s. A little over eight years before the publishing of *Nickel and Dimed*, a December 1992 airing of *Dateline NBC* made claims that the store’s “Made in the USA” signs were placed on foreign goods, and according to a journal article that ran in *Communication Quarterly*,

[Foreign] goods were bought from foreign factories that exploit children, business was shifted from domestic to foreign manufacturers, and goods were sold that violated import quotas. The attack focused primarily on the offensiveness of these actions (Benoit, 1996, p. 463-477).

In response to the broadcast seen in nearly fourteen million households, the then thirty-year-old corporation, launched its “Buy America” program and its CEO, David Glass, made a statement on the day following the program saying that “several points made on the program were ‘inaccurate’ and ‘misleading.’ But he acknowledged that the company, based in Bentonville, Ark., had made some errors,” according to a *New York Times* December 1992 article (Hayes, 1992).

Ehrenreich’s work has made a lasting impression, regardless of the amount of

visible corporate response it received, as can be observed by its mention in several recent articles by newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Mother Jones* and *The Huffington Post*. Ten years after the release of her monumental work, Ehrenreich writes in an article for the *Huffington Post* about *Nickel and Dimed*,

To my own amazement, *Nickel and Dimed* quickly ascended to the bestseller list and began winning awards...Even more gratifying to me, the book has been widely read among low-wage workers. In the last few years, hundreds of people have written to tell me their stories...At the time I wrote *Nickel and Dimed*, I wasn't sure how many people it directly applied to—only that the official definition of poverty was way off the mark, since it defined an individual earning \$7 an hour, as I did on average, as well out of poverty. But three months after the book was published, the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., issued a report entitled “Hardships in America: The Real Story of Working Families,” which found an astounding 29% of American families living in what could be more reasonably defined as poverty...The big question, 10 years later, is whether things have improved or worsened for those in the bottom third of the income distribution, the people who clean hotel rooms, work in warehouses, wash dishes in restaurants, care for the very young and very old, and keep the shelves stocked in our stores. The short answer is that things have gotten much worse, especially since the economic downturn that began in 2008 (2011).

Despite the fact that Ehrenreich's work did not directly lead to immediate social change or legislative movement, many have compared *Nickel and Dimed* to monumental muckrakers, from Ida Tarbell to George Orwell (“Reviews of *Nickel and Dimed*,” 2006).

### CHAPTER 3

This chapter will discuss Eric Schlosser's 2001 book, *Fast Food Nation*, which exposed McDonald's negative practices. The work sparked discussion of the dangers of fast food in the entertainment field, as well as a defensive corporate public relations response by McDonald's. As a result of the relationship between Schlosser's investigative journalism and McDonald's corporate communications efforts, a great deal of change occurred in the form of healthier marketing campaigns and menu items.

"There is this deliberate veil, this curtain that's drawn between us and where our food is coming from. The industry doesn't want you to know the truth about what you're eating because if you knew, you might not want to eat it," said Eric Schlosser in the 2008 documentary, *Food Inc.*, of the battle for the public's right to know about the American food industry (2008).

This deception, employed by companies including McDonald's, is the reason that Schlosser set out to expose the truth about how the nation's food comes to be what is found available at fast food restaurants. He said in a 2006 *PR Watch* interview regarding his book *Fast Food Nation*, "Once I realized how powerful the industry had become and how different it was in reality from the images it was marketing—that's when I became intrigued. Whenever there's something that I think deliberately is being kept from people or deceptive that's when I become curious" (Rosenblum, 2006).

While Schlosser's 2001 exposé of the fast-food industry quickly gained popularity, it became clear that McDonald's, one of the most examined offenders within the text, was working to restore its friendly image.

## Eric Schlosser

Schlosser was born in New York City in 1959 and studied history at Princeton University. While growing up in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, his father, Herbert Schlosser, was the chairman of the NBC television network. The now world-famous journalist studied American history at Princeton and conducted his postgraduate research on British history at Oxford University. He said of his education, "I thought about being an academic and teaching history."

Schlosser said in a 2003 *Telegraph* interview that he always wanted to write. In the early 1990s he tried his hand at screenwriting and editing for Tribeca Productions, but upon submitting his journalistic works to *The Atlantic*, he decided to pursue journalism as a full-time career in his thirties. The magazine rejected his article on homosexuals in the military, but as the result of what he calls "an incredibly fortuitous fluke," the author was offered another assignment writing about the New York City bomb squad after the World Trade Center bombing of 1993 (Leith, 2003).

Within two years of joining the Atlantic staff, he had won the National Magazine Award for his two-part article, "Reefer Madness" and "Marijuana and the Law," which appeared in the publication in September 1994. He went on to receive the Sidney Hillman Foundation award for his article, "In the Strawberry Fields," which appeared in the magazine the following November ("About Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan," 2010).

The author went on to work for publications including *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *The Nation*. During his time at *Rolling Stone*, Schlosser began working on a two-part article on the fast food industry for the



publication in 1998, which was the beginning of his research for *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All American Meal*. The first part of the article was titled “Fast-Food Nation Part One: The True Cost of America's Diet” and was published in September and was followed with the second installment, “Fast-Food Nation Part Two: Meat and Potatoes” in November. After three years of work on his exposé, the book landed on *The New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years, as well as on various bestseller lists in Canada, Great Britain and Japan (“About Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan,” 2010).

*Fast Food Nation* has since been translated into more than 20 languages (“About Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan,” 2010). Within five years of its publishing date, the book had sold more than 1.4 million copies and inspired a movie loosely based on the book’s themes of examining the health, environmental and social consequences of the fast food industry (Severson, 2006). Schlosser’s book is used frequently to educate students about topics ranging from health to history, as he “has been likened to a latter day Upton Sinclair—exposing the abattoirs and abuses in the meatpacking and calorie-packing processed food industry” (Rosenblum, 2006).

After publishing *Fast Food Nation*, the author went on to publish *Reefer Madness* in 2003 and has since been credited with writing a total of six investigative works (Boynton, 2006).

### *Fast Food Nation*

Eric Schlosser’s 2001 book, *Fast Food Nation*, examines the influence the fast food industry has had nationally and globally. The book is comprised of 10 chapters

which aim to inform its readers about the fast-food industry, from its beginnings in 1948 with the first McDonald's restaurant to its marketing campaigns intended to lure children and the slaughterhouses through which the meat used in their products is processed (Sagon, 2001).

As the work is described in John Pilger's *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs*,

Eric Schlosser exposed the global 'fast food' industry in his landmark book, *Fast Food Nation*. In his investigation of famous names like McDonald's, Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken, Schlosser shows how industrial food production has transformed and endangered not only our diet, but our environment, economy and culture, even basic human rights. This exploitation of the most vulnerable workers and children, the ethos of a robotic assembly line, the relentless lobbying and pressure to standardize, monopolize, automate and, above all, dehumanize—Schlosser reveals this as the true face behind its seductive corporate mask (2011, p. 482).

The work opens with "Chapter 1: The Founding Fathers," which addresses the motivation for the emerging fast-food industry during the mid-1900s. The chapter paints a picture of a society focused on developing standards of convenience and consistency based on a "drive-in" lifestyle. Meanwhile, the McDonald brothers, who began their restaurant in 1940, were looking to have a business that was different and more efficient than the period's typical drive-ins. They fired the restaurant's carhops, waitresses and dishwashers and "produced a limited menu, concentrating on just a few items—burgers, fries and beverages—which allowed them to focus on quality at every step" ("The Ray Kroc Story," 2010). Several other fast-food restaurants also began doing business, including Dunkin' Donuts, Burger King, Wendy's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, but several others were not as financially stable, which led to the failures of Henry's, Winky's, Sandy's, and Carrol's. By the 1960s, McDonald's was competing for business

with Taco Bell and Carl's Jr., which caused the industry to grow quickly, and within the years between 1960 and 1973, McDonald's had expanded from having 250 restaurants to having 3,000.

Schlosser's second chapter, "Your Trusted Friends" discusses the ways in which fast food is marketed to children. The section opens with a description of the McStore located at the McDonald's corporate headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois, as well items sold within the storefront. These items include McBurglar dolls, lunch boxes, baby clothes, toy trucks and telephones shaped to look like French fries. Schlosser explains that McDonald's pioneer, Ray Kroc and his colleague, business magnate, Walt Disney, were known for marketing their products and services to children. Schlosser wrote in the chapter,

The Internet has become another powerful tool for assembling data about children. In 1998 a federal investigation of Web sites aimed at children found that 89 percent requested personal information from kids; only 1 percent required that children obtain parental approval before supplying the information. A character on the McDonald's Web site told children that Ronald McDonald was "the ultimate authority in everything." The site encouraged kids to send Ronald an e-mail revealing their favorite menu item at McDonald's, their favorite book, their favorite sports team — and their name. Fast food Web sites no longer ask children to provide personal information without first gaining parental approval; to do so is now a violation of federal law, thanks to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which took effect in April of 2000 (2001, p. 45).

It has been found by market researchers that children can recognize brand logos as early as age two, and based on this vulnerability, the fast-food industry expanded its advertising into United States schools by providing corporate sponsorship. This section closes with the author's statement that children are in no way benefitting from being exposed to advertisements that encourage poor nutritional practices.

In his third chapter, "Behind the Counter," Schlosser focuses on the labor force

that makes the fast-food industry possible. The section begins with a description of political and population changes that occurred during the last three decades of the twentieth century. He goes on to explain that, as McDonald's was Colorado's largest overall employer in the late 1990s, McDonald's used its Colorado Springs stores in order to test cutting labor costs and boosting production speeds. These tests were meant to make the already efficient "Speedee Service System," (used by the McDonald brothers) even more cost-effective. Schlosser says that the fast-food industry manages to keep its wages low by paying minimum wages to the majority of its workers, rarely allowing overtime and hiring teenagers. The section concludes with information about high rates of on-the-job injuries in teenagers working in fast-food restaurants, lacking OSHA regulations and the corporation's aversion to allowing employees unionize.

"Chapter 4: Success" is about the franchise system of the fast-food industry. Schlosser writes about McDonald's owner, Ray Kroc, and his efforts to recruit people to operate their own McDonald's restaurants throughout the United States by paying the corporation a franchising fee. While Kroc asked his franchise owners for their loyalty, many of the people who had become part of his company became millionaires. With the opening of various McDonald's franchises, Kroc gained the development of the Big Mac, Egg McMuffin, Filet-O-Fish and Ronald McDonald. Schlosser also includes insights about the costs and benefits of owning a franchise, as well as data about the increasing prices of the McDonald's franchising fee.

The central theme of work's fifth chapter, titled "Why the Fries Taste So Good," is the processing of fast food. The first portion of the chapter discusses developments in the method of preserving potatoes, especially dehydrating and freezing. The author

offers a history of the growing popularity of freezing foods after WWII, explaining that the 1950s became known as the “Golden Age of Food Processing,” with the increased production of frozen products, from orange juice to TV dinners. He continues by writing about the partnership between McDonald’s and the Simplot Company, who provided the restaurant’s frozen French fries. By the 2001, when the book was published, it was estimated that the average American ate more than 30 pounds of frozen French fries per year. Schlosser tells his reader that the popular flavor of McDonald’s fries did not originally come from the quality of the potatoes from which they are made, but rather from the oil in which they are cooked. Schlosser explained,

Some of the most important advances in flavor manufacturing are now occurring in the field of biotechnology. Complex flavors are being made through fermentation, enzyme reactions, fungal cultures, and tissue cultures. All of the flavors being created through these methods — including the ones being synthesized by fungi — are considered natural flavors by the FDA. The new enzyme-based processes are responsible for extremely lifelike dairy flavors. One company now offers not just butter flavor, but also fresh creamy butter, cheesy butter, milky butter, savory melted butter, and super-concentrated butter flavor, in liquid or powder form. The development of new fermentation techniques, as well as new techniques for heating mixtures of sugar and amino acids, have led to the creation of much more realistic meat flavors. The McDonald’s Corporation will not reveal the exact origin of the natural flavor added to its French fries. In response to inquiries from *Vegetarian Journal*, however, McDonald’s did acknowledge that its fries derive some of their characteristic flavor from “animal products” (2001, p. 128).

Until 1990, this oil was made of 7 percent cottonseed oil and 93 percent beef tallow and contained more saturated beef fat per ounce than the classic McDonald’s hamburger. Once the company began receiving criticism about the contents of their cooking oils, they switched to pure vegetable oil, which contains an unidentified ingredient that McDonald’s calls “natural flavor.” These chemically created additives, he explains, are the way that fast-food restaurants are able to maintain their distinct flavors.

“On the Range,” the sixth chapter of Schlosser’s work, is centered around the economic problems that ranchers and poultry growers face as a result of the consolidation of the meatpacking industry, which stem from the growth of fast-food chains. When Schlosser wrote the work, he noted that many ranchers had sold both their cattle and land, and another large portion of ranchers were nearly out of business. He explained that 84 percent of the nation’s slaughtered cattle come from four meatpacking plants, which use unjust schemes in order to drive down the cost of cattle. Schlosser continues by discussing the struggles of poultry growers, about half of whom leave the business within three years, as they often become bankrupt by the processes they must follow in order to complete their contracts with various buyers. The author concludes the chapter with a powerful statistic: the suicide rate of those working within these meat-related jobs were triple those of the rest of America.

The work’s seventh chapter, “Cogs in the Great Machine,” describes the negative effects of meatpacking operation on the towns in which they are present. Although they were formerly in the nation’s largest cities, such as New York City and Chicago, they are now in rural parts of the United States, particularly those that have an exceptionally low tolerance for unions. Schlosser tells the reader about the revolting smells that permeate through the towns in which such operations are located, which are the result of pits of manure. He continues by writing that the jobs at these plants have an extremely low pay-rate of “one-half union rates” and immigrants from Southeast Asia, Central America, and Mexico primarily hold them. The turnover rate for work at these companies, such as ConAgra, is around 80 percent per year. As the workers were not provided with medical insurance, their injuries and other health-related expenses caused the rural towns’ medical

costs to increase, while poverty, drug abuse and crime were also on the rise.

In “Chapter 8: The Most Dangerous Job” Schlosser describes the typical work of a slaughterhouse employee. He writes that the environment is humid and workers typically have jobs with titles such as Knocker, Sticker, Shackler, Rumper, Navel Boner or First Legger that require them to do various tasks which are brutal in nature. Each year, he explains, more than 25 percent of the workers at meatpacking companies suffer from injuries sustained on the job, a rate which is three times higher than the number of injuries sustained in other factory environments in America. As most work in slaughterhouses is done by hand, the most common types of injuries from which employees suffer is lacerations. Employees often lose fingers, arms or even their lives when in certain slaughterhouse situations. Further explanations for such injuries include language barriers between the workers and their typically English-speaking supervisors, a factor that often prohibits injured workers from filing claims to pay for disability expenses.

Schlosser’s second to last chapter in *Fast Food Nation* is titled, “What’s In the Meat,” which discusses the various illnesses that have been spread by eating contaminated meats. The author writes that foodborne pathogens that can cause reactions as severe as death can also cause long-term health issues ranging from heart disease to neurological problems. It has been found that children who have eaten contaminated products are the most vulnerable to e coli outbreaks, which have even been linked to USDA-approved ground meat served as part of the National School Lunch Program. Studies conducted by the USDA found that over 78 percent of ground beef in 1996 was contaminated by microbes spread primarily by fecal matter. The chapter goes on to

explain that the least expensive ground meat was also most likely to contain spinal cord, bone and gristle. The author explains,

The meatpacking system that arose to supply the nation's fast food chains — an industry molded to serve their needs, to provide massive amounts of uniform ground beef so that all of McDonald's hamburgers would taste the same — has proved to be an extremely efficient system for spreading disease...The CDC estimates that more than three-quarters of the food-related illnesses and deaths in the United States are caused by infectious agents that have not yet been identified. While medical researchers have gained important insights into the links between modern food processing and the spread of dangerous diseases, the nation's leading agribusiness firms have resolutely opposed any further regulation of their food safety practices. For years the large meatpacking companies have managed to avoid the sort of liability routinely imposed on the manufacturers of most consumer products (2001, p. 196).

Schlosser concludes his ninth chapter by informing his readers about the dangers of bringing raw ground beef into their homes, which he refers to as a “potential biohazard.”

The book closes with “Global Realization,” which discusses the ways in which the majority of United States fast-food chains have made slight menu changes and expanded into international markets.

The author wrote,

A number of attempts to introduce healthy dishes (such as the McLean Deluxe, a hamburger partly composed of seaweed) have proven unsuccessful. A taste for fat developed in childhood is difficult to lose as an adult. At the moment, the fast food industry is heavily promoting menu items that contain bacon. “Consumers savor the flavor while operators embrace [the] profit margin,” Advertising Age noted...“Make It Bacon” is one of the new slogans at McDonald's. With the exception of Subway (which promotes healthier food), the major chains have apparently decided that it's much easier and much more profitable to increase the size and the fat content of their portions than to battle eating habits largely formed by years of their own mass marketing.

He continues by telling his readers that,

The cost of America's obesity epidemic extends far beyond emotional pain and low self-esteem. Obesity is now second only to smoking as a cause of mortality in



the United States. The CDC estimates that about 280,000 Americans die every year as a direct result of being overweight...A 1999 study by the American Cancer Society found that overweight people had a much higher rate of premature death. Severely overweight people were four times more likely to die young than people of normal weight. Moderately overweight people were twice as likely to die young. "The message is we're too fat and it's killing us," said one of the study's principal authors. Young people who are obese face not only long-term, but also immediate threats to their health. Severely obese American children, aged six to ten, are now dying from heart attacks caused by their weight (2001, p. 241).

Schlosser continued this chapter by writing that McDonald's was operating in 120 foreign countries by 2001 and that four out of the five new restaurants that the corporation opened everyday was located outside of the United States. At the time the work was written, most chain restaurants earned the majority of their sales from international locations. While these fast-food companies have gained recognition and brand interest in other locations, several nations into which they have expanded have begun to experience increasing childhood obesity rates. Finally the author says that this rapid international expansion has brought with it issues of environmental disregard, decreased labor standards and health problems.

This work was the first of many in the first decade of the 21st century regarding an increased concern regarding the problem of obesity. Works that followed *Fast Food Nation* in the food movement include *Super Size Me*, *Chew On This*, *Food, Inc.* and *Omnivore's Dilemma*.

### Corporate Response

Dick and Mac McDonald started McDonald's in 1940, in San Bernardino, California. In 1961 Ray Kroc bought the company from the McDonalds brothers for \$2.7 million ("McDonald's Corporation and the Issue of Health and Nutrition," n.d., p. 6). In

the years since, McDonald's has expanded exponentially, serving over 46 million customers every day.

After fifty years of success, the 1990s were fraught with negative publicity over poor treatment of employees, factory farming and most notably providing unhealthy food to an uninformed public. In 1994 a Greenpeace affiliate located in England released a flyer titled "What's Wrong with McDonald's? What They Don't Want You to Know" as a protest. McDonald's was quick to quell the distribution of the flyer, and subsequently became involved in a lawsuit against Greenpeace members ("McDonald's Corporation and the Issue of Health and Nutrition," n.d., p. 10). Though the court ruled in favor of McDonald's, this was not enough to keep concerned citizens from investigating McDonald's as a whole. In the years following, the company was involved in what is known now as the "McLawsuit," in which several minors accused McDonald's of causing their obesity and related health problems. In this case, the court ruled in favor of the multi-billion dollar company.

McDonald's has had a notably present public relations and corporate communications staff for decades. In 1998, PR Week reported that,

McDonald's has more than 100 in-house communications staff globally. The largest foreign markets—UK, Germany, France, Japan, Australia, Canada and Brazil - have teams of between eight and 12 PR pros each. McDonald's has an ingrained culture of being able to coordinate communications using in-house resources... 'One of the key things at McDonald's is that we are very much a locally managed company,' says Mike Gordon, McDonald's vice president of international communications... The McDonald's in-house staff, scattered across the world, are briefed with the broad corporate positioning and key messages to ensure the same level of consistency in communications (Gray, 1998).

When threatened by negative publicity, the McDonald's corporation has a history of responding with the backing of its corporate communications team.

Schlosser's 2001 work, *Fast Food Nation*, was clearly not the first attempt at looking at the health, social and economical issues caused by the fast-food industry. Although Schlosser was not the first, nor the last, to criticize the ethical standards of McDonald's, his work continues to be recognized internationally as one of the most influential pieces of journalism in recent years. The work began to "heighten awareness of the adverse health effects of heavy consumption of fast food" from the time it was published (Mello, 2003). With all of the negative attention that McDonald's received as a consequence of the work, the corporation released a single statement regarding *Fast Food Nation*, but the corporation also went on to make observable changes that are linked to issues discussed within the book.

According to *ABC News*, McDonald's released a statement saying, "His [Schlosser's] opinion is outvoted 45 million to 1 every single day, because that's how many customers around the world choose to come to McDonald's for our menu of variety, value and quality" ("Will Fast Food Be The Death of Us?," 2002).

In the 2001 McDonald's Annual Report, the company addressed its concern about beef safety. McDonald's also went on to introduce new menu items that were exceedingly high in fat content, including the McPhilly Cheesteak, Cheddar Bacon Sausage McMuffin, Chicken Strips and Tin Roof Waffle Cone Sundae (2001).

McDonald's Vice President of Corporate Media Relations Walt Ricker was reported to have said that "the bottom line, not the book, prompted the company to examine its core business." After having reported a record loss of \$344 million during its 2002 fourth quarter, the company "retooled stores and pumped up both its dollar menus and marketing to restore profit levels," which illustrates that the public wanted a healthy

change rather than gimmicks in the form of new menu items (Severson, 2006). By the end of 2002, the company introduced its new line of “Premium Salads” in the 2002 McDonald’s Annual Report.

Spokesman Ricker went on to explain:

To try to pick out a point in time and try to attach it to a movement or a book is really missing the point...We have to stay true to our customers. If people raise concerns, we have the responsibility to provide answers and balance. If it's talking more about animal welfare standards, quality and where the food really comes from, different from myth-making and misinformation, it's what we need to do” (Severson, 2006).

After suffering from its first significant financial loss, the company launched “Plan to Win” in 2003, announcing the strategy in its annual report saying that the plan was, “aimed at making McDonald’s our customers’ favorite place and way to eat by implementing the key drivers of an exceptional customer experience—people, products, price, place and promotion” (“McDonald’ annual report summary,” 2003). McDonald’s rehired its CEO, Jim Cantalupo, in 2003 to implement the “Plan to Win” (Martin, 2009). Cantalupo also worked with U.S. operations chief Mike Roberts to launch the company’s “Eat Smart, Be Active” initiative, which was an attempt to revive McDonald’s U.S. sales (“McDonald’s phasing out super-size fries, drinks,” 2004).

Throughout 2003, McDonald’s marketed their new salads to “health-conscious women” as part of the “Eat Smart, Be Active” campaign according to a *USA Today* article. The article said of this development,

A new line of Premium Salads with Newman's Own salad dressings helped McDonald's boost same-store sales 6.3% in May. It's the biggest gain in four years. McDonald's has been trying to sell salads for more than a decade. At first, they were sold in containers displayed in countertop refrigerators. More recently, the featured offering was McSalad Shakers — a sort of a salad in a cup. These are being replaced by the Premium Salads, which are finally getting salad sales traction (Howard, 2003).

These premium salads became the central feature of McDonald's "Go Active Meal" campaign in 2003 and 2004. A *USA Today* article from 2003 says, "Instead of Happy Meal standards like a burger and a toy, the new Go Active meal will include a salad, an exercise booklet and a pedometer meant to encourage walking." The company also hired Oprah Winfrey's trainer at the time, Bob Greene, to design some new products (Ward, 2004).

This effort was rewarded by positive commentary from health experts, but also greeted with some skepticism. The previously mentioned *USA Today* article said,

McDonald's has a "long, long way to go" to solidify a reputation for promoting healthy foods, said Bob Goldin, an analyst at Chicago-based food consultancy Technomic. But Goldin is willing to give the company credit for trying. "McDonald's sees some major trends, and the company is trying to be responsive," Goldin said. "Whether these initiatives will actually move the needle (to boost sales), I don't know" ("McDonald's testing healthier, adult 'Go Active' meal," 2003).

In addition to adding healthier choices to the adult-gearred menu of the restaurant, *USA Today* reported in July 2003 that McDonald's planned to begin offering apple slices as a substitute in the child-marketed Happy Meal ("McDonald's to test fruit in Happy Meal," 2003) after a 15-month sales decline of the iconic menu item (Acitelli, 2004).

On the corporate communications front, the company launched another campaign in late 2003 and early 2004. In September 2003, McDonald's began marketing with the phrase, "i'm lovin' it". As was explained in a *PR Newswire* article, the

'i'm lovin' it' campaign is a new way of connecting with our customers," said Bill Lamar, senior vice president and chief marketing officer, McDonald's USA. "It will rekindle the emotional bond our customers have with McDonald's through a campaign that depicts how people live, what they love about life and what they love about McDonald's" ("McDonald's(R) USA Launches 'I'm lovin' it(TM)' Brand Campaign," 2003).

*PR Week* reported in January 2004:

McDonald's sees PR as a key part of its overall marketing plans in 2004, particularly as it rolls out its successful salad offerings to countries in Europe and elsewhere...McDonald's has dubbed its new marketing effort "Rolling Energy." The effort was designed to focus on increasing credibility with consumers at a time when people are becoming more interested in taking an active role in their diets..."Public relations is a very important part of our whole Rolling Energy program," Light said. "Paid advertising has its limitations. PR will get us into media that has high credibility, particularly with young adults. Our whole new brand strategy is to communicate a more youthful strategy."...In the US, it kicked off its salad with a New York press conference featuring Paul Newman, whose salad dressings McDonald's offers..."Rolling Energy is about creating energy with our customers all across the world," explained Dean Barrett, SVP and global brand business officer. Advertising, marketing, and PR are "all key components of our Rolling Energy plan," he said (Frank, 2004).

Despite the company's efforts to provide healthy choices and roll out new communications efforts, the next work that would inspire more criticism against McDonald's was already in the works. Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*, which was somewhat motivated by the reception of Schlosser's 2001 work, set out to investigate the influence of the fast-food industry while simultaneously examining the negative effects of eating solely McDonald's food over the course of one month. Writer and director Spurlock said in his documentary, "The bottom line: They're a business, no matter what they say. And by selling you unhealthy food, they make millions. And no company wants to stop doing that" (2004). Before its wide release in May 2004, Spurlock won an award for film direction at Sundance Film Festival ("McDonald's phasing out super-size fries, drinks," 2004).

Just two months before *Super Size Me* was released, McDonald's began phasing out its menu's "Supersize" option. McDonald's spokesman Ricker said of this change that it had "nothing to do with that (film) whatsoever." A March 2003 *NBC* article reported, "The company has called the documentary 'a super-sized distortion of the

quality, choice and variety available at McDonald's.' It says the film is not about McDonald's but about Spurlock's decision to act irresponsibly by eating 5,000 calories a day — 'a gimmick to make a film.'" In a seven-page memo released by the corporation, McDonald's stated that, "The reason for reducing the number of fry sizes is to simplify operations and enhance our ability to deliver better service to our guests... [the 7-ounce French fry carton] will be eliminated as part of our healthy lifestyle initiative" ("McDonald's phasing out super-size fries, drinks," 2004).

With the enormous success that the food movement was having, Fox Searchlight released its film adaptation of *Fast Food Nation* on November 17, 2006. This time McDonald's was prepared to combat its critics. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, Kim Severson wrote:

That's not to say McDonald's and other leaders in the fast-food industry aren't keeping an eye out for the film version of "Fast Food Nation." McDonald's marketing executives have created a strategy to handle reactions to the film, and the company briefed franchise owners about it as part of a 2006 overview of communications and marketing plans, Advertising Age magazine reported last month" (2006).

Also during the same time frame, Schlosser published *Chew on This* with Charles Wilson, a journalist for *New York Times Magazine* and *The New Yorker*, who had gained recognition for his exploration of broad social issues by using the perspective of personal stories. The work, which was released in 2006, focused on the fast-food industry, McDonald's in particular. *Chew On This* covered much of the subject material that Schlosser's 2001 work had discussed, but unlike *Fast Food Nation*, the work was aimed toward young adult readers (specifically those that are middle-school age) ("About Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson," 2007).

In response to these reiterations of *Fast Food Nation*, Richard Ellis, VP of

communications for McDonald's U.S said, "When things are topical and timely, it's a good opportunity to communicate to our operators and make sure they have information about things that affect our industry," when he confirmed that both the film and book had been discussed with franchisees as part of a 2006 overview of the corporation's communications and marketing plans.

Ellis continued by explaining in an article published by Advertising Age, "The company is always concerned about anything that is a potential reputational hit. But neither the book nor the movie are out yet so it would be premature to speculate what that might look like." The VP of communications went on to confirm that legal recourse was discussed briefly, but "until we saw either, we wouldn't have a legal opinion" (Macarthur, 2006).

The article explained that the film of *Fast Food Nation* was using creative license to illustrate its themes and plot.

"McDonald's is concerned because the film can take creative license and people can perceive those licenses with direct associations to McDonald's...It's hard to control." said another executive close to the situation. And that's not the only threat the chain faces from Mr. Schlosser. By the time his "Fast Food Nation" hits theaters later this year, he will already have been through an intense promotional schedule for the May release of "Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food."

Another McDonald's executive came forward to speak about the release of *Chew On This*. As was reported in PR Week on April 21, 2006,

Walt Riker, head of corporate communications at McDonald's, said these efforts, which will include an increase in the number of media tours, are not being done in response to the movie version of Eric Schlosser's book, *Fast Food Nation*, and the follow-up book that is aimed at teens..."These are proactive initiatives that have been in place around the world for some time now," Riker said. "We feel that if it's a book or a movie, a news story, or a program, and it brings more attention to us, we're going to be prepared to tell our story and we see that as opportunity." Riker stressed that this is not a campaign or initiative suddenly thrown together by



McDonald's to battle misperceptions. He said it's simply a "ramping up" of the company's current programs... "More facts, more numbers, and more real validation that we can talk about - I think that's a better way to talk about ourselves," Riker said. "At the end of the day, facts are the best anecdote to any misperceptions or claims" (Bush, 2006).

While the statements made by Ellis, Riker and their anonymous colleague seemed thoughtful, other players in the fast-food industry took matters into their own hands. In a May 11, 2006 report from *PR Watch*, John Stauber informed readers of an effort called "Best Food Nation." This was a "sound-alike website" that was funded by the American Farm Bureau Federation, American Meat Institute, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, National Council of Chain Restaurants, and 14 other food lobbies. The website, which has now been removed from its previous domain, highlighted "anti-Schlosser rants by industry-funded front groups including Heartland Institute and the American Council on Science and Health."

The article explained that,

Chicago-based Heartland Institute distributed a news release saying Schlosser was: 'tricking young people . . . to lead them away from capitalism into his failed socialist ideology.' " The corporate food industry's coordinated attack on Schlosser flies in the face of much conventional advice about "crisis management" PR and how best to discredit critics. Funding front groups such as the Heartland Institute to harass an author as respected and popular as Schlosser is likely to create a controversy that will simply give him a bigger stage. But the corporate food industry is not known for its subtlety (Stauber, 2006).

In May 2006, for the first time since Schlosser's 2001 work was published, a McDonald's UK Chief Executive, Steve Esterbrook, appeared on *BBC Newsnight* with Schlosser to discuss the journalist's claims against the corporation. Schlosser's opening statement on the program was,

I respect him for appearing in public. No one from McDonald's has appeared in public with me since the first book was written five years ago and for me, this

isn't a personal vendetta. I've never criticized McDonald's executives by name. My complaint is mainly with the business practices of McDonald's, which I think are harming children, are harming animals, and one thing I need to bring up is the history of McDonald's and how it handles anyone who criticizes them. I'm portrayed as an extremist...The emphasis shouldn't be on the critics, it should be on the issues, so I'm happy that there is now a discussion and I think that McDonald's really needs to look carefully at how it markets to children, what kind of products it markets to children, the kinds of jobs it provides and the environmental impact of its food ("McDonald's vs. Schlosser," 2006).

While Schlosser made mentions of the McDonald's low standards for ethical meat production and marketing tactics, Esterbrook often responded by explaining the differences between McDonald's in the United States and McDonald's in the United Kingdom. When asked about the relative healthiness of the food, he stressed the company's healthy changes to salt and fat content and menu selections.

"The average customer comes into McDonald's three to four times a month and I am absolutely convinced that that can fit in very comfortably into a balanced diet," said Esterbrook during the 2006 interview. When asked if it were healthy to consume the restaurant's famous burgers more than the average three to four times per month, Esterbrook responded, "If we continue to expand our menu, if we continue to expand to evolve and modernize our menu and we create new options, such as salads, toasted deli sandwiches, then I believe [it could be part of a balanced diet]...It depends on what they're buying" ("McDonald's vs. Schlosser," 2006).

In response to Schlosser's claim about the McDonald's advertising being directed at children, Esterbrook said, "We've made absolute statements of intent...We said that we will always place one item of fruit or one item of vegetables in every Happy Meal advert. Now that is progress. That is us acting as a modern progressive company" ("McDonald's vs. Schlosser," 2006).

The interview of the corporate representative and the journalist did not settle any arguments, but it did serve as a platform for the dialectic relationship between investigative journalism and corporate public relations to be presented.

Furthermore, *The Public Relations Strategic Toolkit* mentions of the company's international efforts,

Nick Hindle (2011) was McDonald's UK vice president for communications and was tasked with dealing with the company's reputational problems after *Fast Food Nation* in 2001 and *Supersize Me* in 2004...McDonald's became associated with obesity...McDonald's commissioned research to see exactly how much the negative connotations were costing it...[Hindle] stresses that...fundamental problems must be fixed to rebuild trust...Journalists and stakeholders were taken to see where core ingredients were sourced...The company also paid attention to its internal communications and policies. *Fast Food Nation* had introduced the term 'McJob' to mean a dead end job with no prospects. McDonald's challenged this and made it possible for employees to take basic qualifications through the company and became an accredited examination body...A website was launched called 'Make up your own mind', where the public were invited to ask questions of the company. Journalists from the Sun were invited to work shifts in restaurants...The company experienced nineteen quarter of growth up to April 2011 (Theaker and Yaxley, 2012, p. 162-163).

Over the course of several years of criticism, debate and corporate change, it is became clear that McDonald's had responded to Schlosser's work and the work that it inspired on several occasions and in multiple ways. The company originally used the public relations tactic referred to as "Denial" in William L. Benoit's "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication". Benoit describes denial when, "a firm may deny that the act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone." McDonald's moved forward in 2002 through 2004 to what Benoit calls, "Corrective Action," which essentially means "the company promises to correct the problem. This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act."

In 2006, with the release of the *Fast Food Nation* movie and *Chew On This*, the corporation used two variations of image repair in order to reduce offensiveness of the claims against them. These methods included attacking their accuser and bolstering. Benoit describes attacking the accuser as “reducing credibility of accuser,” while bolstering is defined as “strengthen[ing] the audience’s positive feelings toward the itself, in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act” (1997, p. 177).

### Conclusion

While Schlosser’s book and the works it inspired that informed the general public about the dangers of eating fast food have had a major impact on the current outlook on food consumption in America, the author still believes that there is work to be done. He wrote in a March 2012 article for *The Beast*,

More than a decade has passed since *Fast Food Nation* was published, and I’d love to report that the book is out of date, that the many problems it describes have been solved, and that the Golden Arches are now the symbol of a fallen empire, like the pyramids at Giza. Sadly, that is not the case. Every day about 65 million people eat at a McDonald’s restaurant somewhere in the world, more than ever before. Everything that I’ve learned since *Fast Food Nation* was published has made me more, not less, optimistic about the possibilities for change. I believe, more than ever before, that nothing about our current food system was inevitable. And when things aren’t inevitable, that means things don’t have to be the way they are. I hope that 10 years from now this book really is irrelevant—and that the world it describes, so full of greed and lacking in compassion, is just a bad memory (2012).

Today McDonald’s acknowledges that it learned from its public relations struggles during the period in which *Fast Food Nation* (in book and film forms), *Super Size Me* and *Chew On This* were released. In *PR Week*, the company’s Senior Vice President of UK Corporate Affairs, Nick Hindle, has given the following insight as what the international corporation has learned,

Since then, we have learned a lot about how you rebuild brand reputation. First, you need to be long-sighted and see the bigger picture. Rediscovering strategy is vital to rediscovering your voice. You must strike a new balance between sales and investing in who you are and how you communicate that. Second, you have to be honest about how much a negative sentiment costs you. Third, advertising is not the answer. You cannot advertise your way out of operational problems. If there is a fundamental disconnect between what you say and what your customers see every day, you undermine trust. You have to fix the fundamentals and be honest about what you are and why.

The senior VP continued by saying,

We have made more changes to the menu in the past five years than the previous 30. We went right to the heart of the business, offering more choice and cutting the amount of fat, salt and sugar in old favorites. We overhauled Happy Meals and we have become one of the biggest UK sellers of cut fruit. Fourth, you have to communicate differently when trust is on the floor. We had to step forward and challenge prejudice, correct inaccurate allegations and debate the important issues in the open. This cannot be done defensively or by wagging fingers at critics. We recognized that a progressive company is open and frank. This meant inviting engagement, admitting failings, and opening doors to scrutiny without fear. We needed to be more confident of who we were and make some big moves. We changed from what I would call a 1+1+1 incremental comms strategy to one that is more like McDonald's squared (Hindle, 2011).

This is one story where the relationship between corporate public relations and investigative journalism seemed to reach an admirable conclusion. As *The Times* reported upon the release of *Fast Food Nation*, “Schlosser could do for the fast food industry what Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* did for producers of pesticides” (*Fast Food Nation*, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of three cases of modern muckraking and their contested relationships with corporate public relations shows that corporate reactions are often based on the extremity of claims and accusations within the journalistic works. While *Silent Spring* and *Fast Food Nation* were the target of more intense corporate-created criticisms than *Nickel and Dimed*, each of the works managed to inform the public and create visible change.

Throughout this examination of the dynamic between investigative journalism and corporate public relations an increased understanding within the corporate communications field as to the appropriate response to crisis is evident. This is illustrated by the change and evolution in the methods of image restoration from the time of *Silent Spring* to *Nickel and Dimed* and *Fast Food Nation*. In the early days of public relations, communications professionals were centrally focused on discrediting the claims of those who were threatening business. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, it is clear that a shift occurred, leading to the realization that boosting and reinforcing corporate image is more effective. In response to *Fast Food Nation*, McDonald's corporate public relations team exhibited a hybrid of both attacking and bolstering to maintain its image. While it is debatable whether this hybrid is the most effective form of corporate response, upon reviewing data from the individual case studies, it appears that it does create the most continual and visible change in communication and practice.

It is also important to evaluate what makes one piece of journalism intensely controversial to a corporation. As exhibited by the comparatively slight response of Wal-Mart to Ehrenreich's book, a moderately controversial piece of journalism may not be

exclusively focused on one corporation, may not be backed by hard evidence and may be based on personal opinion. Carson and Schlosser's works, however, exhibited characteristics that made their works highly controversial to chemical companies and McDonald's, respectively, as they used science-backed facts and were not based primarily on personal experiences.

Despite the fact that the three works discussed in the thesis involved different levels of reception and methods of image restoration by effected corporations, each proved to be important to the current understanding of corporate communications, as well as the importance of investigative reporting.

In discussing the significance of investigative reporting within the three discussed case studies, it is important to reiterate the similarities between these influential journalists. Carson, Ehrenreich and Schlosser were able to reach a broad audience and make change because they were all reputable intellectuals who felt a responsibility to share the truth about serious dangers and corruption. When closely examining the work of these three highly educated individuals, it becomes clear that people who have this level of intellect and skill for expressing complex facts have a duty to provide the public with this type of life-changing information in terms the public can easily understand.

While none of the three "modern muckrakers" discussed in this thesis studied specifically to become journalists, each of them found a relevant way to portray significant issues to mass public audiences. This fact demonstrates that anyone with enough motivation, evidence, education and intellect has the ability to make visible changes.

Interestingly, while the companies that responded to the message of these world-famous journalists all had a substantial amount of money to repair their images, the voices of Carson, Ehrenreich and Schlosser all made a social impact. Although large corporations have the ability to spend their money on philanthropic causes, they often still decide to use a significant amount of their budgets on bolstering and repairing their images. This indicates that corporations have an understanding of profitability that places reputation above all other factors and pays close attention to the words of those who threaten it.

In conclusion, the three case studies demonstrate that muckraking continues to be a provocative field that has the ability to create real change in corporations, while corporate public relations maintain flexibility in their varying image crisis responses. Through this examination of the dialectic relationship between muckraking and public relations, it becomes clear that investigative journalism is a public service that often leads to catalyzing a public relations response that completes a corresponding public service.

Ultimately, the dynamic tension between muckraking journalism and public relations displays a relationship of progressive duality. This duality exists in the sense that, while the two opposing forces have different motives that often hinder the public's access to accurate information, their interaction often creates change that is both lasting and powerful. Whether it is the protection of nature, quality of life standards or health of a nation, modern muckraking ensures that people across America, and increasingly, the world, have the right to information that has the power to bring justice and save lives.

Informative reporting is not a newfound idea; it is an essential part of America's groundwork within the First Amendment of the Constitution. As Thomas Jefferson



wrote, “To preserve the freedom of the human mind then and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom; for as long as we may think as we will, and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement” (1799).

Muckraking and its related communications field of public relations are important because they play an increasingly large role in the understanding of democracy, economy and society.

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### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Maria T. NeCastro was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on February 13, 1992. She was raised in Machias, Maine, and graduated from Machias Memorial High School in 2010 as valedictorian. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and enjoys all aspects of writing and editing. As a graduating journalism major and psychology minor, NeCastro plans to pursue a career in public relations, marketing and communication.